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Merle's Crusade

BY ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

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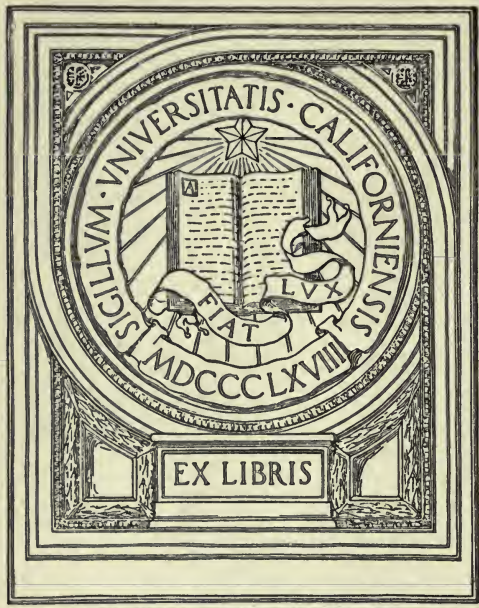

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MERLE'S CRUSADE

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

NEW YORK:
GEORGE MUNRO'S SONS, PUBLISHERS
17 TO 27 VANDEWATER STREET

THE MOTHER'S MISSION.

A great Emperor once asked one of his noble subjects what would secure his country the first place among the nations of the earth. The nobleman's grand reply was, "Good mothers." Now, what constitutes a good mother? The answer is conclusive: She who, regarding the future welfare of her child, seeks every available means that may offer to promote a sound physical development, to the end that her offspring may not be deficient in any single faculty with which nature has endowed it. In infancy there is no period which is more likely to affect the future disposition of the child than that of teething, producing as it does fretfulness, moroseness of mind, etc., which if not checked will manifest itself in after days.

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MERLE'S CRUSADE.

CHAPTER I.

THE VALLEY OF HUMILIATION.

"MERLE, I may be a little old-fashioned in my notions; middle-aged people never adjust their ideas quite in harmony with you young folk, but in my day we never paused to count fifty at a full stop."

Aunt Agatha's voice startled me with its reproachful irritability. Well, I had deserved that little sarcasm, for I must confess that I had been reading very carelessly. My favorite motto was ringing in my ears, *Laborare est orare.*

Somehow the words had set themselves to resonant music in my brain; it seemed as though I were chanting them inwardly all the time I was climbing down the steep hill with Christiana and her boys. *Laborare est orare.* And this is what I was reading on that still, snowy Sunday afternoon: "'But we will come again to this Valley of Humiliation. It is the best and most fruitful piece of ground in all these parts. It is a fat ground, and, as you see, consisteth much in meadows, and if a man was to come here in the summer-time as we do now, if he knew not anything before thereof, and if he delighted himself in the sight of his eyes, he might see that which would be delightful to him. Behold how green this valley is, also how beautiful with lilies! I have known many laboring men that have got good estates in this Valley of Humiliation.'"

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Agatha, my dear father's only sister, and I detested Uncle Keith with a perfectly unreasonable detestation.

Aunt Agatha had been a governess all her life. Certainly the Fenton family had not much to boast of in the way of wealth. Pedigree and poverty are not altogether pleasant yoke fellows. It may be comfortable to one's feelings to know that a certain progenitor of ours made boots at the time of the Conquest, though I am never quite sure in my mind that they had boot-makers then; but my historical knowledge was always defective. But a little money is also pleasant; indeed, if the pedigree and the money came wooing to me, and I had to choose between them—well, perhaps I had better hold my tongue on that subject; for what is the good of shocking people unless one has a very good reason for doing so?

My father's pedigree did not help him into good practice, and he died young—a grave mistake, people tell me, for a professional man to commit. My mother was very pretty and very helpless, but then she had a pedigree too, and, probably, that forbade her to soil her white hands. She was a fine lady, with more heart than head, which she had lost most unwisely to the handsome young doctor. After his death, she made futile efforts for her child's sake, but the grinding wheel of poverty caught the poor butterfly and crushed her to death.

My poor tender-hearted, unhappy mother! Well, the world is a cruel place to these soft, unprotected natures.

I should have fared badly but for Aunt Agatha; her hardly earned savings were all spent on my education. She was a clever, highly educated woman, and commanded good salaries, and out of this she contrived to board and maintain me at a school until she married, and Uncle Keith promised that I should share their home.

I never could understand why Aunt Agatha married him. Perhaps she was tired of the drudgery of teaching; at forty-five one may grow a little weary of one's work.

Perhaps she wanted a home for her old age, and was tired of warming herself at other people's fires, and preferred a chimney corner of her own; but, strange to say, she always scouted these two notions with the utmost indignation.

"I married your uncle, Merle," she would say, with great dignity, "because he convinced me that he was the right person for me to marry. I have no more idea than you how he contrived to instill this notion into my head, for though I am a plain body and never had any beauty, I must own I liked tall, good-looking men. But there, my dear, I lived forty-five years in the world without three things very common in women's lives—without beauty, without love, and without discontent." And in this last clause she was certainly right. Aunt Agatha was the most contented creature in the world.

If Uncle Keith—for never, never would I call him Uncle Ezra, even had he asked me as a personal favor to do so—if Uncle Keith had been rich, I could have understood the marriage better, being rather a mercenary and far-sighted young person, but he had only a very small income. He was managing clerk in some mercantile house, and, being a thrifty soul, invested all his spare cash instead of spending it.

Aunt Agatha had lived in grand houses all her life, but she was quite content with the little cottage at Putney to which her husband took her. They only kept one servant; but Aunt Agatha proved herself to be a notable housekeeper. She arranged and rearranged the old-fashioned furniture that had belonged to Uncle Keith's mother until she had made quite a charming drawing-room; but that was just her way; she had clever brains and clever fingers, and to manipulate old materials into new fashions was just play-work to her.

But for me, I am perfectly convinced that Aunt Agatha would have called herself the happiest woman in the world, but my discontent leavened the household. If three peo-

ple elect to live together, the success of the scheme demands that one of the three should not smile sourly on all occasions.

For two whole years I tried to be amiable when Uncle Keith was in the room, and at last gave up the attempt in despair, baffled by my own evil tempers, and yet I will say I was not a bad-tempered girl. I must have had good in me, or Aunt Agatha would not have been so fond of me. I call that a real crucial test — other people's fondness for us.

Why is it so difficult to get on with some folk, very worthy people in their way?

Why do some people invariably rub up one's fur until it bristles with discomfort? Why do these same thoroughly estimable creatures bring a sort of moral east wind with them, scarifying one's nerves? Surely it is beneath the dignity of a human being to be rasped by a harsh, drawling voice, or offended by trifling mannerisms. Uncle Keith was just like one of my sums—you might add him up, subtract from him, divide or multiply him, but he would never come right in the end; one always reckoned that he was more or less than he was. He was a little, pale, washed-out-looking man, with sandy hair and prominent brown eyes. Being an old bachelor when he married Aunt Agatha, he had very precise, formal ways, and was methodical and punctual to a fault. Next to Uncle Keith, I hated that white-faced watch of his. I hated the slow, ponderous way in which he drew it from his pocket, and produced it for my special benefit.

I have said that my detestation of Uncle Keith was somewhat unreasonable. I must own I had no grave reasons for my dislike. Uncle Keith had a good moral character; he was a steady church-goer, was painstaking and abstemious; never put himself in a passion, or, indeed, lost his temper for a minute; but how was a girl to tolerate a man who spent five minutes scraping his boots before

he entered his own door, whatever the weather might be; who said, "Hir-rumph" (humph was what he meant) before every sentence, booming at one like a great bee; who always prefaced a lecture with a "my dear;" who would not read a paper until it was warmed; who would burn every cinder before fresh coals were allowed on the fire; who looked reproachfully at my crumbs (I crumbled my bread purposely at last), and scooped them carefully in his hand for the benefit of the birds, with the invariable remark, "Waste not, want not"—a saying I learned to detest.

I suppose if we are ever admitted into heaven we shall find very odd people there; but perhaps they will have dropped their trying ways and peculiarities, as the chrysalis drops its case, and may develop all sorts of new prismatic glories. I once heard a lady say that she was afraid the society there would be rather mixed; she was a very exclusive person; but Solomon tells us that there is nothing new under the sun, so I suppose we shall never be without our modern Pharisees and Sadducees. The grand idea to me is that there will be room for all. I do not know when the idea first came to me that it was a mean thing to live under a man's roof, eating his bread and warming one's self at his fire, and all the time despising him in one's heart. I only know that one day the idea took possession of me, and, like an Eastern mustard seed, grew and flourished. Soon after that Uncle Keith had rather a serious loss—some mercantile venture in which he was interested had come to grief. I began to notice small retrenchments in the household; certain little luxuries were given up. Now and then Aunt Agatha grew a little grave as she balanced her weekly accounts. One night I took myself to task.

"What business have you, a strong, healthy young woman," I observed to myself severely, "to be a burden on these good folk? What is enough for two may be a

tight fit for three; it was that new mantle of yours, Miss Merle, that has put out the drawing-room fire for three weeks, and has shut up the sherry in the sideboard. Is it fair or right that Aunt Agatha and Uncle Keith should forego their little comforts just because an idle girl is on their hands?"

I pondered this question heavily before I summoned courage to speak to Aunt Agatha. To my surprise she listened to me very quietly, though her soft brown eyes grew a little misty—I did so love Aunt Agatha's eyes.

"Dear," she said, very gently, "I wish this could have been prevented; but, for my husband's sake, I dare not throw cold water on your plan. I can not deny that he has had a heavy loss, and that we have to be very careful. I would keep you with me if I could, Merle, for you are just like my own child, but Ezra is not young;" and here Aunt Agatha's forehead grew puckered with anxiety.

"Oh, Aunt Agatha," I exclaimed, quite forgetting the gravity of my proposition in sudden, childish annoyance, "how can you call Uncle Keith, Ezra? It is such a hideous name."

"Not to my ears," she answered, quite calmly; "a wife never thinks her husband's name hideous. He loves to hear me say it, and I love to please him, for though you may not believe it, Merle, I think there are very few men to compare with your uncle."

She could actually say this to my face, looking at me all the time with those honest eyes! I could not forbear a little shrug at this, but she turned the subject, placidly, but with much dignity.

"I have been a working bee all my life, and have been quite contented with my lot; if you could only follow my example, I should be perfectly willing to let you go. I have thought once or twice lately that if anything were to happen to me, you and your uncle would hardly be com-

fortable together; you do not study him sufficiently; you have no idea what he really is."

I thought it better to remain silent.

Aunt Agatha sighed a little as she went on.

"I am not afraid of work for you, Merle; there is no life without activity. 'The idle man,' as some one observes, 'spins on his own axis in the dark.' 'A man of mere capacity undeveloped,' as Emerson says, 'is only an organized day-dream with a skin on it.' Just listen to this," opening a book that lay near her. "'Action and enjoyment are contingent upon each other. When we are unfit for work we are always incapable of pleasure; work is the wooing by which happiness is won.'"

"Yes, yes," I returned, rather impatiently, for Aunt Agatha, with all her perfections, was too much given to proverbial and discursive philosophy; "but to reduce this to practice, what work can I do in this weary world?"

"You can not be a governess, not even a nursery governess, Merle;" and here Aunt Agatha looked at me very gently, as though she knew her words must give me pain, and suddenly my cheeks grew hot and my eyelids drooped. Alas! I knew too well what Aunt Agatha meant; this was a sore point, the great difficulty and stumbling-block of my young life.

I had been well taught in a good school; I had had unusual advantages, for Aunt Agatha was an accomplished and clever woman, and spared no pains with me in her leisure hours; but by some freak of nature, not such an unusual thing as people would have us believe, from some want of power in the brain—at least, so a clever man has since told me—I was unable to master more than the rudiments of spelling.

I know some people would laugh incredulously at this, but the fact will remain.

As a child I had lain sobbing on my bed, beaten down by a very anguish of humiliation at being unable to com-

mit the column of double syllables to memory, and have only been comforted by Aunt Agatha's patience and gentleness.

At school I had a severer ordeal. For a long time my teachers refused to admit my incapacity; they preferred attributing it to idleness, stubbornness, and want of attention; even Aunt Agatha was puzzled by it, for I was a quick child in other things, could draw very well for my age, and could accomplish wonders in needle-work, was a fair scholar in history and geography, soon acquired a good French accent, and did some of my lessons most creditably.

But the construction of words baffles me to this day. I should be unwilling to write the simplest letter without a dictionary lying snugly near my hand. I have learned to look my misfortune in the face, and to bear it with tolerable grace. With my acquaintances it is a standing joke, with my nearest and dearest friends it is merely an opportunity for kindly service and offers to write from my dictation, but when I was growing into womanhood it was a bitter and most shameful trial to me, one secretly lamented with hot tears and with a most grievous sense of humiliation.

"No," Aunt Agatha repeated, in the old pitying voice I knew so well, "you can not be even a nursery governess, Merle."

"Nor a companion either," I exclaimed, bitterly. "Old ladies want letters written for them."

"That is very true," she replied, shaking her head.

"I could be a nurse in a hospital—in fact, that is what I should like, but the training could not be afforded; it would be a pound a week, Aunt Agatha, and there would be my uniform and other expenses, and I should not get the smallest salary for at least two or three years."

"I am afraid we must not think of that, Merle;" and then I relapsed into silence from sheer sadness of heart. I had always so longed to be trained in a hospital, and then

I could nurse wounded soldiers or little children. I always loved little children.

But this idea must be given up; and yet it would not have mattered in a hospital if I had spelled "all right" with one "l." I am quite sure my bandages would have been considered perfect, and that would have been more to the point.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNPREACHED SERMON.

SUCH an odd thing happened a few minutes afterward. I was sitting quite quietly in my corner, turning over in my mind all the arguments with which I had assailed Aunt Agatha that Sunday afternoon, and watching the pink glow of the fire-light in contrast to the whiteness of the snow outside, when the door bell rang, and almost the next moment Uncle Keith came into the room.

I suppose he must have overlooked me entirely, for he went up to Aunt Agatha and sat down beside her.

"Sweetheart," he said, taking her hand, and I should hardly have recognized his voice, "I have been thinking about you all the way home, and what a pleasant sight my wife's face would be after my long walk through the snow and—" But here Aunt Agatha must have given him a warning look, for he stopped rather abruptly and said, "Hir-rumph" twice over, and Aunt Agatha blushed just as though she were a girl.

I could not help laughing a little to myself as I went out of the room to tell Patience to bring in the tea, and yet that sentence of Uncle Keith's touched me somehow. Were middle-aged people capable of that sort of love? Did youth linger so long in them? I had imagined those two such a staid, matter-of-fact couple; they had come together so late in life that one never dreamed of any possible romance in such a courtship, and yet he could call

Aunt Agatha "Sweetheart" in a voice that was not the least drawling. At that moment one would not have called him so plain and insignificant with that kind look on his face. I suppose he keeps that look for Aunt Agatha, for I remember she once told me that she had never seen such a good face as Uncle Keith's, "not handsome, Merle, but so thoroughly good."

Patience was toasting the muffins in her bright little kitchen, so I sat down and watched her. I was rather partial to Patience; she was a pretty, neat-looking creature, and I always thought it a great pity that she was engaged to a journeyman boot-maker, who aspired to be a preacher. I never could approve of Reuben Locke, though Aunt Agatha spoke well of him; he was such a weak, pale-faced young man; and I think a man, to be one, ought to have some spirit in him, and not possess only the womanish virtues.

"How is Reuben, Patience?" I asked, somewhat amiably, just for the pleasure of seeing our little handmaid's dimples come into view.

"Reuben's but poorly, miss," replied Patience, as she buttered another smoking muffin, the last of the pile. "He was preaching at Whitechapel the other night, and caught a cold and sore throat; his mother says he will not be at chapel to-night."

"I do not approve of street preaching myself," I remarked, a little severely.

"Indeed, miss," replied Patience, innocently, as she prepared to carry in the tea-tray. "Reuben always tells me that the apostles were street preachers, and Reuben is as clear as Gospel in what he says." But here the drawing-room bell broke off Patience's argument, and left me somewhat worsted. I went to church by myself that evening, and I am ashamed to say I heard very little of the sermon. I knew Aunt Agatha would be taking advantage of my long absence to retail what she termed my preposter-

ous scheme to Uncle Keith, and that I should have the benefit of his opinion on my return, and this thought made me restless.

I was not wrong in my surmise. Aunt Agatha looked a little pale and subdued, as though she had been shedding a few tears over my delinquencies, but Uncle Keith was simply inscrutable; when he chose, his face could present a perfect blank.

"Hir-rumph, my dear, what is this your aunt tells me, that you are going to Prince's Gate to-morrow morning to offer your services as nurse in a gentleman's family?"

"Yes, Uncle Keith."

"Do you mean to tell me seriously that you have really made up your mind to take this step?"

"Oh, I am quite serious, I assure you."

"Your aunt's objections and mine do not count for much, then?"

"I should be sorry to go against your wishes or Aunt Agatha's," I returned, trying to keep cool; but his manner, as usual, aggravated me; it said so plainly, "What a silly child you are, and yet you think yourself a woman!" "but I must do as I think right in this matter. I hope to prove to you and every one else that there is nothing derogatory in the work I mean to undertake. It is not what I would choose, perhaps, but everything else is closed to me;" thinking sorrowfully of my life-long misfortune, as I always called it, and my repressed longings for hospital training.

"Perhaps if you waited something else might turn up." But I shook my head at this.

"I have waited too long already, Uncle Keith; idleness soon becomes a habit."

"Then if you have made up your mind, it is useless to try and alter it," returned Uncle Keith, in a slightly ironical tone; and he actually took up the volume he was reading in a way that showed he had dismissed the subject.

I was never more astonished in my life; never had Uncle Keith so completely baffled me.

I had spent the whole time during which I ought to have been listening to the sermon in recapitulating the heads of my arguments in favor of this very scheme; I would show Uncle Keith how clearly and logically I could work out the subject.

I had thought out quite an admirable little essay on feminine work in the nineteenth century by the time Mr. Wright had finished his discourse. I meant to have cited the Challoners as an example. Aunt Agatha had stayed in the neighborhood of Oldfield just before her marriage, and had often paid visits at Longmead and Glen Cottage.

The eldest Miss Challoner—Nan, I think they called her—was just preparing for her own wedding, and Aunt Agatha often told me what a beautiful girl she was, and what a fine, intelligent creature the second sister Phillis seemed. She was engaged to a young clergyman at Hadleigh, and there had been some talk of a double wedding, only Nan's father-in-law, Mr. Mayne, of Longmead, had been rather cross at the notion, so Phillis's was to be postponed until the autumn.

All the neighborhood of Oldfield had been ringing with the strange exploits of these young ladies. One little fact had leaked out after another; it was said their own cousin, Sir Henry Challoner, of Gilsbank, had betrayed the secret, though he always vowed his wife had a hand, or rather a tongue, in the business; but anyhow, there was a fine nine-days' gossip over the matter.

It seemed that some time previously Mrs. Challoner and her three daughters had sustained severe losses, and the three girls, instead of losing courage, had put their shoulders to the wheel, and had actually set up as dress-makers at Hadleigh, carrying on their business in a most masterly fashion, until the unexpected return of their relative, Sir Harry Challoner, from Australia, with plenty of money at

his disposal, broke up the dress-making business, and reinstated them at Glen Cottage.

A few of their friends had been much offended with them, but as it was understood that Lady Fitzroy had spoken warmly of their moral courage and perseverance, it had become the fashion to praise them. Aunt Agatha had often quoted them to me, saying she had never met more charming girls, and adding more than once how thoroughly she respected their independence; and of course in recalling the Challoners I thought I should have added my crowning argument.

There was so much, too, that I longed to say in favor of my theory. The love of little children was very strong with me. I had often been pained as I walked through the streets at seeing tired children dragged along or shaken angrily by some coarse, uneducated nurse. It had always seemed rather a pitiful idea to me that children from their infancy should be in hourly contact with rough, menial natures. "Surely," I would say to myself, "the mother's place must be in her nursery; she can find no higher duty than this, to watch over her little ones; even if her position or rank hinder her constant supervision, why need she relegate her maternal duties to uneducated women? Are there no poor gentlewomen in the world who would gladly undertake such a work from very love, and who would refuse to believe for one moment they were losing caste in discharging one of the holiest and purest duties in life?

"What an advantage to the children," I imagined myself saying in answer to some objection on Uncle Keith's part, never dreaming that all this eloquence would be silenced by masculine cunning. "What an advantage to these little creatures to hear English pure and undefiled from their cradles, and to be trained to habits of refinement and good manners by merely instinctively following the example before their eyes. Children are such copyists,

me shudder s to think of these impressionable little beings being permitted by their natural guardians to take their earliest lessons from some uneducated person.

"Women are crying out for work, Uncle Keith," I continued, carrying my warfare into a fresh quarter; but, alas! this, with the rest of my eloquence, died a natural death on my way home. "There are too many of the poor things in this world, and the female market is overstocked. They are invading telegraph offices, and treading on the heels of business men, but sheer pride and stupidity prevent them from trying to open nursery doors.

"Unlady-like to be a servant," another imaginary objection on Uncle Keith's part. "Oh, fy, Uncle Keith! this from you, who read your Bible and go to church? and yet I remember a certain passage, 'Whosoever will be chief among you let him be your servant,' which has hallowed the very idea of service ever since.

"To serve others seems the very meaning of womanhood; in some sense, a woman serves all the days of her life. No. I am not far-fetched and unpractical." Another supposed masculine tirade. "I have thought over the whole thing most carefully. I am not only working for myself, but for others. I want to open the eyes of my generation, and, like the Challoners, to lead a new crusade against the mighty sham of conventionality. Understand me, Uncle Keith, I do not say to these young gentlewomen, 'Put your pride in your pocket, and wheel your perambulator with the twins, or carry the baby into the park before the eyes of your aristocratic acquaintance; that would be unnecessary and foolish; you may leave that part to the under-nurse, who brings your meals and scours your nurseries; I simply say to them, 'If you have no capacity for teaching, if Nature has unfitted you for other work, and you are too proud and conscientious to live a dragging, dependent life under the roof of some overburdened relative, take the charge of some aristocratic nursery. Do not

think it beneath your womanhood to feed and wash and clothe an infant, or to watch over weak toddling creatures. Your work may be humble, but you will grow to love it, and if no one else will put the theory to the test, I, Merle Fenton, will do so, though I must take the plunge unaided and alone.'"

But all these feeling observations were locked up in my own inner consciousness, for during the remainder of the evening Uncle Keith simply ignored the subject, and read his book with a pretense of being perfectly absorbed in it, though I am certain that his eyes twinkled mischievously whenever he looked in my direction, as though he were quite aware of my flood of repressed oratory.

I determined to have it out with Aunt Agatha, so I followed her into her room, and asked her in a peevish voice what she meant by saying Uncle Keith would be so angry with me, as he had not raised a single objection; and, of course, as silence meant consent, I should most certainly keep my appointment at Prince's Gate.

Aunt Agatha looked a little distressed as she answered me.

"To tell you the truth, Merle, I did not quite understand your uncle myself; I expected a very different reception of my news."

"Tell me all about it from the very beginning," I returned, eagerly. "Patience has made such a nice fire, because she said she was afraid you had a cold, and I can just sit by it and brush out my hair while we talk."

"But I am tired and sleepy, child, and after all there is not much to tell," objected Aunt Agatha; but she was far too good-natured to refuse, for all that, so she seated herself, dear soul, in the big chair—that she had christened Idleness—and tried to remember what I wished to hear. I told him everything, Merle; how your one little defect hindered you, poor child, from being a nursery gov-

erness or companion, and how, in spite of this serious obstacle, you were determined to work and be independent.'

"Well, and did he say nothing to all that?" I asked, for I knew in what a feeling manner Aunt Agatha would have described my difficulties.

"Oh, yes; he said, 'Poor little thing,' in the kindest possible way, 'and quite right—very proper,' when I spoke of your desire for work."

"Well?" rather impatiently.

"He listened very attentively until I read him out the advertisement, but that seemed to upset him, for he burst out laughing, and I thought he would never stop. I was half crying by that time, for you had worried me to death all the afternoon, Merle, but nothing I could say would make him grave for a long time. He said once, 'What could have put such a thing into her head?' and then he laughed again as though the idea amused him, and then he rubbed his hands and muttered, 'What an original child it is; there is no deficiency of brain power, as far as I can see; who would have dreamed of such a thing?" and so on."

"Then I may flatter myself that Uncle Keith approves of my scheme?" I observed, stiffly, for I was much offended at the idea of his laugh.

"Oh, dear, no!" returned Aunt Agatha, in an alarmed voice, "he expressed his disapproval very strongly; he said it was all very well in theory, and that, on the whole, he agreed with you that the nursery was undoubtedly a ladylike sphere, but he was far from sure that your scheme would be practical. He foresaw all kinds of difficulties, and that he did not consider you at all the person for such a position."

"Why did not Uncle Keith say all this to me himself?" I demanded.

"Because he said it would only be sowing the wind to raise the whirlwind. In an argument he declares women

always have the best of it, because they can talk the fastest, and never will own they are beaten; to raise objections would only be to strengthen you more in your purpose. I think," finished Aunt Agatha, in her softest voice, "that he hoped your plan would die a natural death, for he recommended me to withdraw all opposition."

Oh, the cunning of these men! I would not have believed all this of Uncle Keith. I was far too angry to talk any more to Aunt Agatha; I only commanded my voice sufficiently to say that I fully intended to keep my appointment the next day; and as she only looked at me very sadly and said nothing, I had no excuse for lingering any longer, so I took up my candlestick and marched into my own room.

It felt cold and desolate, and as I sat down by the toilet, table, such sad eyes looked into mine from the depths of the mirror, that a curious self-pitying feeling made me prop my chin on my hands and exchange looks of silent sympathy with my image.

My want of beauty never troubled me; it has always been my private conviction that we ought to be thankful if we are tolerably pleasant in other people's eyes; beauty is too rare a gift to be often reproduced. If people thought me nice-looking I was more than content; perhaps it was surprising that, with such good-looking parents, I was just ordinary and nothing else. "But never mind, Merle, you have a good figure and talking eyes," as Aunt Agatha once said to me. "I was much plainer at your age, my dear, but my plainness never prevented me from having a happy life and a good husband."

"Well, perhaps I should like a happy life, too, but as for the husband—never dream of that, my good girl; remember your miserable deficiency in this enlightened age. No man in his senses would condone that; put such thoughts resolutely away, and think only of your work in life. *Laborare est orare.*"

CHAPTER III.

THE NEW NURSE.

In looking back on those days, I simply wonder at my own audacity. Am I really and truly the same Merle Fenton who rang at the bell at Prince's Gate, and informed the astonished footman that I was the person applying for the nurse's situation? I recall that scene now with a laugh, but I frankly own that that moment was not the pleasantest in my life. True, it had its ludicrous side; but how is one to enjoy the humor of an amusing situation alone? and, to tell the truth, the six feet of plush and powder before me was somewhat alarming to my female timidity. I hear now the man's startled, "I beg your pardon, ma'am."

"I have come by appointment," I returned, with as much dignity as I could summon under the trying circumstances; "will you inform your mistress, Mrs. Morton, that I have come about the nurse's situation?"

Of course, he was looking at me from head to foot. In spite of the disguising plainness of my dress, I suppose the word gentlewoman was clearly stamped upon me. Heaven forbid that under any circumstances that brand, sole heritage of my dead parents, should ever be effaced! Then he opened the door of a charming little waiting-room, and civilly enough bade me seat myself, and for some minutes I was left alone. I think nearly a quarter of an hour elapsed before he reappeared with the message that his mistress was now disengaged and would see me. I followed the man as closely as I could through the long hall and up the wide staircase; not for worlds would I have owned that a certain shortness of breath, unusual in youth, seemed to impede me. At the top I found myself in a handsome corridor, communicating with two drawing-

rooms of noble dimensions, as they call them in advertisements, and certainly it was a princely apartment that I entered. A lady was writing busily at a small table at the further end of the room. As the man spoke to her she did not at once raise her head or turn round; she was evidently finishing a note. A minute later she laid aside her pen and came toward me.

"I am sorry that I could not attend to you at once, and yet you were very punctual," she began, in a pleasant, well-modulated voice, and then she stopped and regarded me with unfeigned surprise.

She was a very lovely young woman, with an indescribable matronly air about her that spoke of the mother. She would have been really quite beautiful but for a certain worn look, often seen in women of fashion; and when she spoke there was a sweetness and simplicity of manner that was most winning.

"Pardon me," with a shade of perplexity in her eyes, "but I suppose my servant was right in stating that you had come by appointment in answer to my advertisement?"

"Yes, madame," I returned, readily; for her slight nervousness put me at my ease. "I have your letter here."

"And you are really applying for the nurse's situation —the upper nurse, I mean; for, of course, there is an under nurse kept. I hope" (coloring a little) "that you will not think me rude if I say that I was not prepared for the sort of person I was to see."

I could have groaned as I thought of my note. Was it possible that I had spelled "advertisement" wrongly? and yet I had the paper before me; my handwriting was neat and legible; but evidently Mrs. Morton was drawing some comparison between my letter and appearance, and I did not doubt that the former had not prepossessed her in my favor.

I became confused in my turn.

"I hope to prove to you," I began, in a very small voice, "that I am a fit person to apply for your situation. I am very fond of children; I never lose my patience with them, as other people do, or think anything a trouble; I wish to take up this work from love as well as necessity—I mean," correcting myself, for she looked still more astonished, "that though I am obliged to work for my living, I would rather be a nurse than anything else."

"Will you answer a few questions?" and, as though by an after-thought, "will you sit down?" for she had been standing to keep me company, out of deference to my superior appearance.

"I will answer any question you like to put to me, madame."

"You have never been in service, you tell me in your letter. Have you ever filled any kind of situation?"

I shook my head.

"You are quite young, I should say?"

"Two-and-twenty last Christmas,"

"I should hardly have thought you so old. Will you oblige me with your name?"

"Merle Fenton."

A half smile crossed her beautiful mouth. It was evident that she found the name somewhat incongruous, and then she continued a little hastily, "If you have never filled any sort of situation, it will be somewhat difficult to judge of your capacity. Of course you have good references; can you tell me a little about yourself and your circumstances?"

I was fast losing my nervousness by this time. In a few minutes I had given her a concise account of myself and my belongings. Once or twice she interrupted me by a question, such as, for example, when I spoke of Aunt Agatha, she asked the names of the families where she had

lived as a governess; and once she looked a little surprised at my answer.

"I knew the Curzons before I was married," she observed, quietly; "they have often talked to me of their old governess, Miss Fenton; her name is Keith now, you say; she was a great favorite with her pupils. Well, is it not a pity that you should not follow your aunt's example? If you are not clever, would not the situation of a nursery governess be more fitting for you? Forgive me; I am only speaking for your good; one feels a little uncomfortable at seeing a gentlewoman desert the ranks to which she belongs."

My face was burning by this time; of course it must all come out—that miserable defect of mine, and everything else; but raising my eyes at that moment I saw such a kind look on Mrs. Morton's face, such quietly expressed sympathy for my very evident confusion, that in a moment my reserve broke down. I do not know what I said, but I believe I must have been very eloquent. I could hear her say to herself, "How very strange—what a misfortune" when I frankly mentioned my inability to spell; but I did not linger long on this point.

Warmed by her strong interest, I detailed boldly what I called my theory. I told her of my love for little children, my longing to work among them, how deeply I felt that this would indeed be a gentlewoman's work, that I did not fear my want of experience. I told her that once I had stayed for some weeks at the house of one of my school-fellows, and that every night and morning I had gone up to the nursery to help the nurse wash and dress the babies, and that at the end of a week I had learned to do it as well as the woman herself, and that she had told my school-fellow that she had never seen any young lady so handy and patient with children, and that they were happier with me than with their own sister.

"The second child had the croup one night," I con-

tinued, "the mother was away, and nurse was too frightened to be of any use. When the doctor came he praised her very much for her prompt remedies; he said they had probably saved the boy's life, as the attack was a severe one. Nurse cried when he said that, and owned it was not she who had thought of everthing, but Miss Fenton. I tell you this," I continued, "that you may understand that I am reliable. I was only nineteen then, and now I am two-and-twenty."

She looked at me again in a gentle, scrutinizing way; I could feel that I was making way in her good opinion. Her curiosity was piqued; her interest strongly excited. She made no attempt to check me as I launched out into further defense of my theory; but she only smiled, and said, "Very true, I agree with you there," as I spoke of the advantage of having an educated person to superintend the nursery. Indeed, I found myself retailing all my pet arguments in a perfectly fearless way, until I looked up and saw there were tears in her beautiful brown eyes.

"How well you talk!" she said, with a sort of sigh. "You have thought it all out, I can see. I wonder what my husband would say. He is a member of Parliament, you know, and we are very busy people, and society has such claims on us that I can not be much with my children. I have only two: Joyce is three years old, and my boy is nearly eighteen months. Oh, he is so lovely! and to think I can only see him for a few minutes at a time, that I lose all his pretty ways; it is such a trouble to me. His nurse is leaving to be married, and I am so anxious to find some one who will watch over my darlings and make them happy."

She paused, as the sound of approaching footsteps was audible in the corridor, and rose hastily as an impatient "Violet, where are you, my dear?" was distinctly heard.

"That is Mr. Morton; will you excuse me a moment?" And the next moment I could hear her say, "I was in the

blue drawing-room, Alick. I have sent off the letters, and now I want to speak to you a moment;" and her voice died away as they moved further down the corridor.

I felt a keen anxiety as to the result of that conversation. I was very impulsive by nature, and I had fallen in love with Mrs. Morton. The worn look on the beautiful young face had touched me somehow. One of my queer visionary ideas came over me as I recalled her expression. I thought that if I were an artist, and that my subject was the "Massacre of the Innocents," that the mother's face in the foreground should be Mrs. Morton's. "Rachel Weeping for her Children;" something of the pathetic maternal agony, as for a lost babe, had seemed to cross her face as she spoke of her little ones. I found out afterward that, though she wore no mourning, Mrs. Morton had lost a beautiful infant about four months ago. It had not been more than six weeks old, but the mother's heart was still bleeding. Many months afterward she told me that she often dreamed of her little Muriel and woke trying to stifle her sobs, that she might not disturb her husband. I sat cogitating this imaginary picture of mine, and shuddering over the sanguinary details, until Mrs. Morton returned, and, to my embarrassment, her husband was with her.

I gave him a frightened glance as he crossed the room with rapid footsteps. He was a quiet-looking man, with a dark mustache, some years older than his wife. His being slightly bald added somewhat to his appearance of age. In reality he was not more than five-and-thirty. I thought him a little cool and critical in manner, but his voice was pleasant. He looked at me keenly as he spoke; it was my opinion at that moment that not an article of my dress escaped his observation. I had selected purposely a pair of mended gloves, and I am convinced the finger-ends were at once under his inspection. He was a man who thought no details beneath him, but would bring his masculine in-

tellect even to the point of discovering the fitness of his children's nurse.

"Mrs. Morton tells me that you have applied for the situation of upper nurse," he began, not abruptly, but in the quick tones of a busy man who has scant leisure. "I have heard all you have told her; she seems desirous of testing your abilities, but I must warn you that I distrust theories myself. My dear," turning to his wife, "I must say that this young person looks hardly old enough for the position, and you own she has no real experience. Would not a more elderly person be more suitable, considering that you are so seldom in your nursery? Of course, this is your department, but since you ask my advice—" with a little shrug that seemed to dismiss me and the whole subject.

A wistful, disappointed look came over his wife's face.

I was too great a stranger to understand the real position of affairs, only my intuition guided me at that moment. It was not until much later that I found out that Mrs. Morton never disputed her husband's will, even in trifles; that he ordered the plan of her life as well as his own; that her passionate love for her children was restrained in order that her wifely and social duties should be carried out; that she was so perfectly obedient to him, not from fear, but from an excess of womanly devotion, that she seldom even contested an opinion. My fate was very nearly sealed at that moment, but a hasty impulse prompted me to speak. Looking Mr. Morton full in the face, I said, a little piteously, "Do not dismiss me because of my youth, for that is a fault that time will mend. Want of experience is a greater obstacle, but it will only make me more careful to observe every direction and carry out every wish. If you consent to try me, I am sure neither you nor Mrs. Morton will repent it."

He looked at me very keenly again as I spoke; indeed,

his eye seemed to search me through and through, and then his whole manner changed.

I have been told that Nature had been kind to me in one respect by endowing me with a pleasant voice. I believe that I was freer from vanity than most girls of my age, but I was glad in my inmost heart to know that no tone of mine would ever jar upon a human ear, but I was more than glad now when I saw Mr. Morton's grave face relax.

"You speak confidently," he returned. "You seem to have a strange faith in your own theory, and plenty of self-reliance, but I am afraid that, like most young people, you have only regarded it from one point of view. Are you aware of the unpleasantness of such a situation? If you came to us you might have nothing of which to complain from Mrs. Morton or myself, but we could not answer for the rest of my household; the servants would regard you as a sort of hybrid, belonging to no special sphere; they might show you scant respect, and manifest a great deal of jealousy.

"I have faced all that," I returned, with a smile, "but I think the difficulties would be like Bunyan's lions—they were chained, you know. I do not believe these things will hurt me. I should never be away from the children in the nursery; I should be unmolested and at home."

"Alick!" I could hear a whole petition breathed into that softly uttered word. Mr. Morton heard it too, for he turned at once, and then looked at his wife.

"Do you really wish to try this young person, Violet, my dear? It is for you to decide; this is your province, as I said before."

"If she will love our children and watch over them in our absence," she whispered; but I caught the words. Then aloud, "Yes, thank you, Alick, I should like to try her. I think she would make Joyce happy. I can go and

see Mrs. Keith this afternoon when I am out driving, and perhaps I could arrange for her to come soon."

"Very well," he returned, briefly; but he spoke in the old dry manner, as though he were not quite pleased. "When you are disengaged will you join me in the library? I have some more letters I want copied."

"I will be ready soon," she said, with a sweet, grateful glance at him, as though she had received some unexpected bounty at his hands; and as he wished me good-morning, and left the room, she continued, eagerly, "Will you come with me now and make acquaintance with the children? I have seen them already this morning, so they will not expect me, and it will be such a surprise. My little girl is always with me while I dress. I have so little time to devote to them; but I snatch every moment."

She sighed as she spoke, and I began to understand, in a dim, groping sort of way, that Fate is not so unequal after all, that even this beautiful creature had unsatisfied wants in her life, that it was possible that wealth and position were to her only tiresome barriers dividing her from her little ones. Her sweetest pleasures only came to her by snatches. Most likely she envied humble mothers, and did not pity them because their arms ached with carrying a heavy infant, aching limbs being more bearable than an aching heart.

A flight of broad, handsomely carpeted stairs brought us to a long shut-in corridor, fitted up prettily with plants and statuettes. A rocking-horse stood in one corner; the nursery door was open. It was a long, cheerful room, with three windows, looking over the public garden, and fitted up with a degree of comfort that bordered on luxury. Some canaries were singing in a green cage, a gray Persian kitten was curled up in the doll's bassinet, a little girl was kneeling on the cushioned window-seat, peeping between the bars at some children who were playing below. As Mrs. Morton said, softly, "Joyce, darling," she turned

round with quite a startled air, and then clambered down hastily and ran to her mother.

"Why, it is my mother," in quite an incredulous voice, and then she caught hold of her mother's gown, and peeped at me from between the folds.

She was a pretty, demure-looking child, only somewhat thin and fragile in appearance, not in the least like her mother, but I could trace instantly the strongest resemblance to her father. She had the straight, uncurling hair like his, and her dark eyes were a little sunken under the finely arched brows. It was rather a bewitching little face, only too thin and sallow for health, and with an intelligent expression, almost amounting to precocity.

"And where is your brother, my darling?" asked her mother, stooping to kiss her; and at this moment a pleasant-looking young woman came from the inner room with a small curly-haired boy in her arms.

As she set him down on the floor, and he came toddling over the carpet, I forgot Mrs. Morton's presence, and knelt down and held out my arms to him. "Oh, you beauty!" I exclaimed, in a coaxing voice, "will you come to me?" for I quite forgot myself at the sight of the perfect baby features.

Baby pointed a small finger at me, "O', 'ook, gurgle-da," he said, in the friendliest way; and I sealed our compact with many kisses.

"Dear me, ma'am," observed nurse, eying me in a dubious manner, for probably the news of my advent had preceded me to the upper regions, "this is very singular; I never saw Master Baby take such a fancy to any one before; he always beats them off with his dear little hand."

"Gurgle-da, 'ook, 'ook," was baby's unexpected response to this, as he burst into a shout of laughter, and he made signs for me to carry him to the canaries.

I do not know what Mrs. Morton said to nurse, but she came up after a minute or two and watched us, smiling.

"He does seem very friendly; more so than my shy pet here," for Joyce was still holding her mother's gown.

"She will be friends with me too," I returned, confidently; "children are so easily won." And then, as Mrs. Morton held out her arms for her boy, I parted with him reluctantly.

There was no need for me to stay any longer then. Mrs. Morton reiterated her intention of calling on Aunt Agatha that afternoon, after which she promised to speak to me again; and feeling that things were in a fair way of being settled according to my wishes, I left the house with a lighter heart than I had entered it.

CHAPTER IV.

MERLE'S LAST EVENING AT HOME.

"So it is all settled, Merle."

"Yes, Aunt Agatha," I returned, briskly, for she spoke in a lugubrious voice; and as one sad face was enough beside the family hearth, I assumed a tolerably cheerful aspect. If only Aunt Agatha's eyes would not look at me so tenderly!

"Poor child!" she sighed; and then, as I remained silent, she continued, in a few minutes, "I wish I could reconcile myself more to the idea, but I can not help feeling a presentiment that you will live to repent this strange step you are taking."

I found this speech a little damping, but I bore it without flinching. One can never set out down some new road without a few friendly missiles flying about one's ears. "Remember, I told you such and such a thing would happen if you did not take my advice. I am only warning you for your good." Alas! that one's dearest friend should be transformed into a teasing gadfly! What can one do but go straight across the enemy's country, when

the boats are destroyed behind one? I always did think that a grand action on Xenophon's part.

"You have not given me your opinion of my new mistress," was my wicked rejoinder.

Aunt Agatha drew herself up at this and put on her grandest manner. "You need not go out of your way to vex me, Merle. I am sufficiently humiliated without that."

"Aunt Agatha," I remonstrated; for this was too much for my forbearance, "do you think I would do anything to vex you when we are to part in a few days? Oh, you dear, silly woman!" for she was actually crying, "I am only longing to know what you think of Mrs. Morton."

"She is perfectly lovely, Merle," she returned, drying her eyes, as I kissed and coaxed her. "I very nearly fell in love with her myself. I liked the simple way in which she sat down and talked to me about my old pupils, making herself quite at home in our little drawing-room, and I was much pleased with her manner when she spoke about you; it was almost a pity you came into the room just then."

"I left you alone for nearly half an hour; please to remember that."

"Indeed! it did not seem nearly so long. Half an hour! And it passed so quickly, too. Well, I must say Mrs. Morton is a most interesting woman; she is full of intelligence, and yet so gentle. She has lost her baby—did she tell you that?—only four months ago, and her husband does not like her to wear mourning. She is a devoted wife, I can see that; but I have a notion that you will have some difficulty in satisfying Mr. Morton; he is very particular, and hard to please."

"I have found out that for myself; he is a man of strong prejudices."

"Well, you must do your best to conciliate him; tact

goes a long way in these cases. Mrs. Morton has evidently taken a fancy to you, Merle. She told me over again how her baby boy had made friends with you at once; she said your manner was very frank and winning, and though you looked young, you seemed very staid and self-reliant."

"I wish Uncle Keith had heard that. Did she say any more about me, Aunt Agatha?"

"No, you interrupted us at that point, and the conversation became more general; but, my dear, I must scold you about one thing: how absurd you were to insist on wearing caps! Mrs. Morton was quite embarrassed; she said she would never have mentioned such a thing."

"But I have set my heart on wearing them, Aunt Agatha," I returned, very quickly; "you have no idea how nice I shall look in a neat bib apron over my dark print gown, and a regular cap, such as hospital nurses wear. I should be quite disappointed if I did not carry out that part of my programme; the only thing that troubles me is the smallness of my salary—I mean wages. Thirty pounds a year will never make my fortune."

"You can not ask more with a good conscience, Merle; you have never been out before, and have no experience. Mrs. Morton said herself that her husband had promised to raise it at the end of six months if you proved yourself competent; it is quite as much as a nursery governess's salary."

"Oh, I am not mercenary," I replied, hastily, "and I shall save out of thirty pounds a year. I must keep a nice dress for my home visits and for Sundays, though it is dreadful to think that I shall not always go to church every Sunday until little Joyce is older; that will be a sad deprivation."

"Yes, my poor child, but you must not speak as though this were the only serious drawback; you will find plenty of difficulties in your position; even Mrs. Morton confessed that."

"The world is full of difficulties," I returned, loftily; "there have been thorns and briers ever since Adam's time. Do you remember your favorite fable of the old man and the bundle of sticks, Aunt Agatha? I mean to treat my difficulties in the same way he managed his. I shall break each stick singly."

She smiled approvingly at this, and then, as Uncle Keith's knock reached her ear, she rose quickly and went out of the room.

The moment I was left alone my assumed briskness of manner dropped into the mental *déshabille* that we wear for our own private use and comfort. Those two had always so much to say to each other that I was sure of at least half an hour's solitude, and in some moods self is the finest company. Yes, I had destroyed my boats, and now my motto must be "Forward!" This afternoon I had pledged myself to a new service—a service of self-renunciation and patient labor, undertaken under the influence of love to our Great Master and in the effort to follow His example—yes, I dare to say it—with the double desire, viz., of doing as much good as lay in my power, and also for the welfare of the large sisterhood of waiting and working women. A servant? No, a soldier; for I should be one among the vanguard, who strive to make a breach in the great fortress of conventionality. Not that I feared the word service, considering what Divine lips had said on that subject—"I am among you as one who serveth"—but I knew how the world shrunk from such terms.

I have always maintained that half the so-called difficulties of life consist mainly in our dread of other people's opinions; women are especially trammeled by this bondage. They breathe the atmosphere of their own special world, and the chill wind of popular opinion blows coldly over them; like the sensitive plant, they shiver and wither up at a touch. I believe the master minds that achieve great things have created their own atmosphere, else how

can they appear so impervious to criticism? How can they carry themselves so calmly, when their contemporaries are sneering round them? We must live above ourselves and each other; there is no other way of getting rid of the shams and disguises of life; and yet how is one who has been born in slavery to be absolutely true? How is an English gentlewoman to shake off the prejudices of caste and declare herself free?

Ah, well! this was the enigma I had set myself to solve. And now the old life—the protected girl's life—was receding from me; the old guards, the old landmarks were to be removed by my own hands. Should I live to repent my rash act, as Aunt Agatha predicted, or should I at some future time, when I looked back upon this wintery day, thank God, humbly and with tears of gratitude, that in humble trust and in dependence upon His spirit for guidance I had courage given me to see the right and do it, *ad finem fidelis*, faithful to the last?

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I found those last few days of home life singularly trying. Indeed, I am not sure that I was not distinctly grateful when the final evening arrived. When one has to perform a painful duty there is no use in lingering over it; and when one is secretly troubled, a spoken and too discursive sympathy only irritates our mental membrane. How could Job, for example, tolerate the sackcloth and ashes, and, worse still, the combative eloquence of his friends?

Aunt Agatha's pathetic looks and pitying words fretted me to the verge of endurance. I wished she would have been less mindful of my comforts, that she would not have insisted on helping me with my sewing, and loading me with little surprises in the shape of gifts. But for the bitter cold that kept me an unwilling prisoner by the fireside, I would have escaped into my own room, to avoid the looks that seemed to follow me everywhere.

But I would not yield to my inward irritability; I hummed a tune; I even sung to myself, as I hemmed my new bib aprons, or quilled the neat border for my cap. Nay, I became recklessly gay the last night, and dressed myself in what I termed my nurse's uniform, a dark navy-blue cambric, and then went down to show myself to Uncle Keith, who was reading aloud the paper to Aunt Agatha. I could see him start as I entered; but Aunt Agatha's first words made me blush, and in a moment I repented my misplaced spirit of fun.

"Why, Merle, how pretty you look! Does not the child look almost pretty, Ezra, though that cap does hide her nice smooth hair? I had no idea that dress would be so becoming." But the rest of Aunt Agatha's speech was lost upon me, for I ran out of the room. Why, they seemed actually to believe that I was play-acting, that my part was a becoming one! Pretty, indeed! And here such a strange revulsion of feeling took possession of me that I absolutely shed a few tears, though none but myself was witness to this humiliating fact.

I did not go down-stairs for a long time after that, and then, to my relief, I found Uncle Keith alone; for men are less sharp in some matters than women, and he would never find out that I had been crying, as Aunt Agatha would; but I was a little taken aback when he put down his paper, and asked, in a kind voice, why I had stayed so long in the cold, and if I had not finished my packing.

"Oh, yes," I returned, promptly, "everything was done, and my trunk was only waiting to be strapped down."

"That is right," he said, quite heartily; "always be beforehand with your duties, Merle; your aunt tells me you have made up your mind to leave us in the morning. I should have thought the afternoon or early evening would have been better."

"Oh, no, Uncle Keith," I exclaimed; and then, oddly

enough, I began to laugh, and yet the provoking tears would come to my eyes, for a vision of sundry school domestics arriving toward night with their goods and chattels, and the remembrance of their shy faces in the morning light seemed to evoke a sort of dreary mirth; but, to my infinite surprise and embarrassment, Uncle Keith patted me on the shoulder as though I were a child.

"There, there; never mind showing a bit of natural feeling that does you credit; your aunt is fretting herself to death over losing you—hir-rumph; and I do not mind owning that the house will be a trifle dull without you; and, of course, a young creature like you must feel it too." And with that he took my hands, awkwardly enough, and began warming them in his own, for they were blue with cold. If Aunt Agatha had only seen him doing it, and me, and with the babyish tears running down my face!

"Why, look here," continued Uncle Keith, cheerily, with a sort of cricket-like chirp, "we are all as down as possible, just because you are leaving us, and yet you will only be two or three miles away, and any day if you want us we can be with you. Why, there is no difficulty, really; you are trying your little experiment, and I will say you are a brave girl for venturing on such a brave scheme. Well, if it does not answer, here is your home, and your own corner by the fireside, and an old uncle ready to work for you. I can't say more than that, Merle."

"Oh, Uncle Keith," I returned, sobbing remorsefully, "why are you so good to me, when I have always been so ungrateful for your kindness?"

"Nay, nay, we will leave by-gones alone,' he answered, a little huskily. "I never minded your tantrums, knowing there was a good heart at the bottom. I only wished I was not such a dry old fellow, and that you could have been fonder of me. Perhaps you will understand me better some day, and—" Here he stopped and cleared his

throat, and said "hir-rumph" once or twice, and then I felt a thin crackling bit of paper underneath my palm. "It will buy you something useful, my dear," he finished, getting up in a hurry. A five-pound note, and he had lost so much money and had to do without so many comforts! Who can wonder that I jumped up and gave him a penitent hug?

It was long before I slept that night, and my first waking thoughts the next morning were hardly as pleasant as usual. A premonitory symptom of homesickness seized me as I glanced round my little room in the dim winter light. Aunt Agatha had made it so pretty; but here a certain suspicious moisture stole under my eyelids, and I gave myself a resolute shake, and commenced my toilet in a business-like way that chased away gloomy thoughts.

Never had the little dining-room looked more inviting than when I entered it that morning. One of Uncle Keith's carefully hoarded logs blazed and crackled in the roomy fire-place, a delicious aroma of coffee and smoking ham pervaded the room. Aunt Agatha, in her pretty morning-cap, was placing a vase of hot-house flowers some old pupil had sent her in the center of the table, and the bullfinch was whistling as merrily as ever, while old Tom watched him, sleepily, from the rug. I was rather long warming my hands and stroking his sleek fur, for somehow I could not bring myself to look or speak in quite my ordinary manner; and though Uncle Keith did his best to enliven us by reading out scraps from his newspaper, I am afraid we gave him only a partial attention. When Uncle Keith had bade me a husky good-bye, and had gone to his office, Aunt Agatha and I made a grand feint of being busy. There was very little to do, really, but I considered it incumbent to be in a great state of activity. I am afraid to say how many times I ran up and downstairs for articles that were safely deposited at the bottom of my box. Aunt Agatha put a stop to it at last by tak

ing my hand and putting me forcibly in Uncle Keith's big chair.

"Sit there and keep warm, Merle; the cab will not be here for another half hour; what is the use of our pretending that we are not exceedingly unhappy? My dear, you are leaving us with a sore heart, I can see that, and it only makes me love you all the better. Yes, indeed, Merle," for I was clinging to her now and sobbing softly under my breath; "and however things may turn out, whether this step be a failure or not, I will always say that you are a brave girl who tried to do her duty."

"Are you sure you think that, Aunt Agatha?"

Then she smiled to herself a little sadly.

"You remind me of the baby Merle who was so anxious to help every one. I remember you such a little creature, trying to lift the nursery chair, because your mother was tired; and how you dragged it across the room until you were red in the face, and came to me rubbing your little fat hands, and looking so important. 'The chair hurted baby dreffful, but it might hurted poor mammy worser:' that was what you said. I think you would still hurt yourself 'dreffful' if you could help some one else."

It was nice to hear this. What can be sweeter or less harmful than praise from one we love? It was nice to sit there with Aunt Agatha's soft hand in mine, and be petted. It would be long before I should have a cozy time with her again. It put fresh heart in me somehow; like Jonathan's taste of honey, "it lightened my eyes," so that when the final good-bye came, I could smile as I said it, and carry away an impression of Aunt Agatha's smile too, as she stood on the steps, with Patience behind her, watching until I was out of sight. I am afraid I am different to most young women of my age,—more imaginative, and perhaps a little morbid. Many things in every-day life came to me in the guise of symbols or signs—a good-bye, for example. A parting [illegible] for a short time always appears

to me a faint type of that last solemn parting when we bid good-bye to temporal things. I suppose kind eyes will watch us then, kind hands clasp ours; as we start on that long journey they will bid God help us, as with failing breath and, perhaps, some natural longings for the friends we love, we go out into the great unknown, looking for the Divine Guide to take us by the hand. "In my Father's house are many mansions." He who gave the promise and who died to make it ours, will lead us to those other rooms, where the human drops will be wiped away, and where pain and trouble are unknown.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. GARNETT'S ROCKERS.

I HAD plenty of time for such introspective thoughts as these during my brief railway journey, and before my luggage and I were safely deposited at 35 Prince's Gate.

Again I rang the bell, and again the footman in plush and powder answered the door, but this time there was no hesitation in his manner.

"Miss Fenton, I believe," he said, quite civilly. "If you step into the waiting-room a moment I will find some one to show you the way to the nursery;" and in two or three minutes a tall, respectable young woman came to me, and asked me, very pleasantly, to follow her upstairs.

On the way she mentioned two or three things; her mistress was out in the carriage, and Miss Joyce was with her. The nurse had left the previous night, and Master Reginald had been so fretful that the housekeeper had been obliged to sleep with him, as Hannah had been no manner of use—"girls never were," with a toss of her head, which showed me the rosy-cheeked Hannah was somewhat in disfavor. Mrs. Garnett was with him now, and had had a "great deal of trouble in lulling him off to sleep, the pretty dear."

We had reached the children's corridor by this time, and I heard the full, cozy tones of Mrs. Garnett's voice in "Hush a bye, baby," and the sound of rockers on the floor. The sound made me indignant that my baby should be soothed with that wooden tapping. No wonder so many children suffered from irritability of the brain; for I was as full of theories as a sucking politician.

"Ook, gurgle-da," exclaimed baby, and pointed a fat finger at me over Mrs. Garnett's shoulder. Of course he was not sleep; it would have been an insult to his infantine wisdom to suppose it.

"Oh, Master Baby," exclaimed Hannah, reproachfully. "I did think he had gone off then, Mrs. Garnett; and you have been rocking him for the best part of an hour."

"Ah, he misses his old nurse," returned Mrs. Garnett, placidly. She was a pretty-looking woman, with flaxen hair, just becoming streaked with gray. Perhaps she was a widow, for she wore a black gown, and a cap with soft floating ends, and had a plaintive look in her eyes. "I hope he will take to you, my dear, for he nearly fretted his little heart out last night, bless him; and Mrs. Morton crept up at two o'clock in the morning, when Mr. Morton was asleep, but nothing would do but his old nurse; he pushed her away, and it was "Nur, nur," and we could not pacify him. Poor Mrs. Morton cried at last, and then he took to patting her and laughing at her in the drollest way."

"I will just take off my bonnet and try and make friends with him," I returned; and Hannah, who really seemed a good-natured creature, ushered me into the night nursery—a large, cheerful room, with a bright fire and a comfortable-looking bed, with a brass crib on each side—and pointed out to me the large chest of drawers and hanging wardrobe for my own special use, and then went down on her knees to unstrap my box.

"Thank you, Hannah, I will not wait to unpack now,

as I dare say Mrs. Garnett is wanted down-stairs;" and as soon as she had left the room I opened the box and took out the pretty cap and apron, and proceeded to invest myself in my nurse's livery. I hope Aunt Agatha had not made me vain by that injudicious praise, but I certainly thought they looked very nice, and gave me a sense of importance.

The tall house-maid—Rhoda they called her—stared at me as I re-entered, but Mrs. Garnett gave me an approving glance; but it was baby who afforded me most satisfaction, for he screwed up his little rosebud of a mouth in the prettiest fashion, and said, "Nur, nur," at the same time holding out his arms for me to take him. I must confess I forgot Aunt Agatha in that moment of triumph.

"He takes to you quite nicely, my dear," observed Mrs. Garnett, in her cozy voice, as the little fellow nestled down contentedly in my arms.

"Yes, you may leave him to me now I think," I returned, quietly, for I felt that I should be glad to be left to myself a little. I was very thankful when my hint was taken, and Mrs. Garnett and Rhoda went down-stairs and Hannah disappeared into the next room. My charge was becoming decidedly drowsy, and after a few turns up and down the room, I could sit down in the low chair by the fire and hear the soft, regular breathing against my shoulder, while my eyes traveled round the walls of my new home.

Such a pleasant room it was, large and bright and sunny, and furnished so tastefully. The canaries were singing blithely; the Persian kitten was rolled up into a furry ball on the rug; a small Skye terrier, who I afterward discovered went by the name of Snap, was keeping guard over me from a nest of cushions on the big couch opposite. Now and then he growled to himself softly, as though remonstrating against my intrusion, but whenever I spoke to him gently he sat up and begged, so I imagined his animosity was not very bitter.

"My lines have fallen to me in pleasant places." I wonder why those words came to my mind. I wished Aunt Agatha could see me now, sitting in this lovely room, with this little cherub on my lap; she would not be so despondent about the future. "I do believe it will answer; I mean to make it answer," I said to myself, energetically. Indeed, I was so absorbed in my reverie, that Mrs. Morton's soft footsteps on the thick carpet never roused me until I looked up and saw her standing beside me, smiling, with Joyce beside her.

I colored with embarrassment, and would have risen, but she put her hand on my shoulder, still smiling, to prevent me. She looked lovelier than ever, in her rich furs, and there was a happier look on her face than I had seen before, as she stooped down and kissed her boy.

"He is sleeping so nicely, the darling. Mrs. Garnett tells me he has taken to you wonderfully, and I hope my little girl will follow his example; it is such a relief to me, for he nearly broke our hearts last night with fretting after nurse. He looks a little pale, do you not think so?" And then she stopped and looked in my face, with a puzzled smile. "What am I to call you? I never thought of that; shall it be Miss Fenton? But there are the children; they could not manage such a difficult name."

The difficulty had never occurred to me, and for the moment I hesitated, but only for a moment.

"The children will always call me nurse, and I suppose your household will do the same, Mrs. Morton. I think, for yourself, you will find Merle the handiest name; it is short."

"It is very pretty and uncommon," she returned, musingly, "and it has this one advantage, it hardly sounds like a Christian name; if you are sure you do not object, perhaps I will use it; but," speaking a little nervously, "you need not have worn this," pointing to my cap. 'You remember I said so to your aunt."

"I think it better to do so," I returned, in a decided voice; in fact, I am afraid my voice was just a little too decided in speaking to my mistress, but I was determined not to give way on this point. "I wish to wear the badge of service, that I may never forget for one moment what I owe to my employers, and"—here the proud color suffused my face—"no cap can make me forget what is due to myself."

I could see Mrs. Morton was amused, and yet she was touched too. She told me afterward that she thought me that moment the most original young woman she had ever seen.

"You shall do as you like," she returned; but there was a little fun in her eyes. "It certainly looks very nice, and I should be sorry if you took it off. I only spoke for your aunt's sake and your own; for myself I certainly prefer it."

"So do I," was my independent answer; "and now, if you please, I think I will lay baby in his cot, as he will sleep more soundly there, and then it will be time to get Joyce ready for her dinner;" for, in spite of my cap, I had already forgotten to say "Miss Joyce," or to call my mistress, "ma'am," though I have reason to know that Mrs. Morton was not at all displeased with the omission.

"It might have been a princess in disguise waiting on my children, Merle," she said to me, many months afterward. But I knew nothing of the secret amusement with which my mistress watched me as she stood by the nursery fire in her furs, warming herself; I only knew that I loved to see her there, for from the first moment my heart had gone out to her. She was so beautiful and gentle; but it was not only that.

Baby woke just as I was putting him in his cot, and I had some little troubling in lulling him to sleep again. Hannah was dressing Joyce, and as soon as she had finished, I tried to make friends with the child. She was

very shy at first, but I called Snap, and made a great fuss over him. I was just beginning to make way, when the gong summoned Mrs. Morton to luncheon, and soon after that the nursery dinner was served. Hannah waited upon us very nicely, and then took her place at the table. She was a thoroughly respectable girl, and her presence was not in the least irksome to me. I always thought it was a grand old feudal custom when all the retainers dined at the baron's table, taking their place below the salt. Surely there can be nothing derogatory to human dignity in that, seeing that we shall one day eat bread together in the kingdom of heaven.

I wonder if half the governesses fared so luxuriously as I that day; certainly the chicken and bread sauce were delicious. As soon as we had finished, baby woke up, and I fed him, and then Joyce and he and I had a fine game of romps together, in which Snap, and the kitten, and all Joyce's dolls joined.

I had dressed the kitten up in doll's clothes, and the fun was at its height when the door opened, and Mr. Morton came in. I discovered afterward that it was his custom to make a brief visit to the nursery once in the four-and-twenty hours, sometimes with his wife, but often alone.

Joyce ran to him at once; she was devoted to her parents, especially to her mother, but the boy refused to leave me unless his father would take the kitten too.

"I suppose I must humor you, my fine fellow," observed Mr. Morton, pleasantly, as he kissed the little fellow with affection; and then he turned to me.

"I hope you find yourself comfortable, nurse, and that my children are good to you."

"They could not be better, sir, and I am quite comfortable, thank you," I returned, with unusual meekness. I was not a very meek person generally, as Uncle Keith could testify, but there was a subduing influence in Mr.

Morton's look and voice. I must own I was rather afraid of him, and I would not have omitted the "sir" for worlds, neither would I have seated myself without his bidding; but he took it all quite naturally.

"As my wife and I are dining out, Joyce will not come down in the drawing-room as usual," he observed, in his business-like manner. "Do you hear, my little girl? Mother and I are engaged this evening, and you must stay upstairs with Reggie."

"Werry tiresome," I heard Joyce say under her breath, and then she looked up pleadingly into her father's face. "Her is coming by and by, fardie?"

"Oh, no doubt," stroking the dark hair; "but mother is driving at present. Now, say good-bye to me, Joyce, and you must give me a kiss, too, my boy. Good-evening, nurse." And that was all we saw of Joyce's father that day; only an hour later, when the nursery tea was over, and I was undressing the boy by the bedroom fire, while Joyce stood beside me, removing the garments carefully from a favorite doll, and chattering as fast as a purling brook, I saw Mrs. Morton standing in the door-way, looking at us.

Joyce uttered a scream of delight, and threw herself upon her. "Mine mother! mine mother!" she repeated over and over again.

Mrs. Morton had the old, tired look on her face as she came forward rather hurriedly. "I can not stay; there are people down-stairs, and when they have gone I must dress for dinner." She gave a sort of harassed sigh as she spoke.

"Could you not rest a little first?" I returned. "You have been out the greater part of the day, and you do not seem fit for the evening's fatigue," for there was quite a drawn look about the lovely mouth.

She shook her head, but, nevertheless, yielded when I gave her up my chair and put the boy in her arms; in his

little chemise, and with his dimpled shoulders and bare legs, he was perfectly irresistible to his mother, and I was not surprised to see her cover him with kisses. "My bonny boy, my precious little son," I could hear her whisper, in a sort of ecstasy, as I picked up the little garments from the floor and folded them. I seemed to know by instinct that it was only this that she needed to rest her; the drawn, weary lines seemed to vanish like magic. What a sweet picture it was! But her pleasure, poor soul, was short-lived; the next moment she had recollected herself.

"There are all those people in the drawing-room! What would my husband say at my neglecting them? Good-night, my darling; be good; and good-night, Merle."

She smiled at me in quite a friendly fashion, and hurried away without another look.

"I always do say master does make a slave of mistress," grumbled Hannah, as she filled the bath; "she never has a moment to herself that I can see. What is the use of having children if one never sees them?" And though I refrained from any comment I quite indorsed Hannah's opinion. As soon as Hannah had cleared the room, I shaded the light, and began quietly arranging my clothes in the wardrobe, and then I sat down in the low chair beside the fire. Through the open door I could see Hannah's bent head as she sat at her sewing. The nursery looked warm and cozy—a very haven of comfort; but I wanted to be alone for a time to think over the occurrences of the day. "To commune with one's own heart and to be still." How good it is to do that sometimes! For a few moments my thoughts lingered lovingly in the little cottage at Putney. Aunt Agatha and Uncle Keith would be talking of me, I knew that. I could almost hear the pitying tones of Aunt Agatha's voice, "Poor child! How lonely she will feel without us to-night!" Did I feel lonely? I hardly think so; on the contrary, I had the warm, satisfied conviction at my heart that I was in my right

place, the place for which I was most fitted. How tenderly would I watch over these helpless little creatures committed to my care! how sacred would be my charge! What a privilege to be allowed to love them, to be able to win their affection in return!

I had such a craving in my heart to be loved, and hitherto I had no one but Aunt Agatha. It seemed to me, somehow, as though I must cry aloud to my human brothers and sisters to let me love them and take interest in their lives; to suffer me to glean beside them, like loving Ruth in those Eastern harvest fields, following the reapers, lest happily a handful might fall to my share; for who would wish to go home at eventide empty-handed as well as weary?

CHAPTER VI.

WHEELER'S FARM.

After all, the difficulties were like Bunyan's chained lions—they did not touch me. How true it is that "one half our cares and woes exist but in our thoughts." I had predicted for myself all manner of obstacles and troubles, and was astonished to find how smoothly and easily the days glided by.

From the beginning I had found favor in my mistress's eyes, and Mrs. Garnett had also expressed herself in warm terms of approbation. "Miss Fenton was a nice, proper young lady, who gave herself no airs, and was not above her duties; and Master Reggie was already as good as gold with her." This was Mrs. Garnett's opinion; and as she was a great authority in the household, I soon experienced the benefit of her good-will.

With the exception of Hannah, who generally called me "nurse" or "miss," I was "Miss Fenton" with the rest of the household; even the tall house-maid, Rhoda, who

had charge of our rooms, invariably addressed me by that name.

Mrs. Garnett generally prefaced her remarks with "My dear." I found out afterward that she was the widow of a merchant captain, and a little above her position; but Anderson, the butler, and Simon and Charles, the footmen, and Travers, Mrs. Morton's maid, always accosted me by the name of Miss Fenton; but I had very little to do with any of them—just a civil good-morning as I passed through the hall with the children. The messages to the nursery were always brought by Rhoda; and though Mrs. Garnett and Travers sometimes came in for a few minutes' gossip I never permitted the least familiarity on Travers's part, and, to do her justice, she never gave me any cause for offense. She was a superior person, devoted to her mistress, and as she and Anderson had been engaged for years, she had almost the staid manners of a married woman.

I soon became used to my new duties, and our daily routine was perfectly simple; early rising was never a hardship to me—I was too strong and healthy to mind it in the least. Hannah lighted the fire, that the room should be warm for the children, and brought me a cup of tea. At first I protested against such an unusual indulgence, but as Hannah persisted that nurse always had her cup of tea, I submitted to the innovation.

Dressing the children was merely play-work to me, with Hannah to assist in emptying and filling the baths. When breakfast was over, and Joyce and I had cleaned and fed the canaries, and attended to the flowers, Hannah got the perambulator ready, and we went into the park or Kensington Gardens.

Joyce generally paid a visit to her mother's dressing-room before this, and on our way out baby was taken in for a few minutes in his little velvet pelisse and hat. We generally found Mrs. Morton reading her letters while

Travers brushed out her hair and arranged it for the day. She used to look up so brightly when she saw us, and and such a lovely color would come into her face at the sight of her boy, but she never kept him long. "Be quick, Travers," she would say, putting the child in my arms. "I can hear your master's footsteps on the stairs, and he will be waiting for me." And then she kissed her hand to the children, and took up her letters again; but sometimes I caught a stifled sigh as we went out, as though the day's work was distasteful to her, and she would willingly have changed places with me.

On our return the children had their noonday sleep, and Hannah and I busied ourselves with our sewing until they woke up, and then the nursery dinner was brought up by Rhoda. Hannah always waited upon us before she would consent to take her place.

In the afternoon I sat at my work and watched the children at their play, or played with them. When Reggie was tired I nursed him, and in the twilight I sung to them or told them stories.

I never got quite used to Mr. Morton's visits—they always caused me embarrassment. His duties at the House occupied him so much that he had rarely time to do more than kiss his children. Sometimes Reggie refused to be friendly, and struck at his father with his baby hand, but Mr. Morton only laughed.

"Baby thinks fardie is only a man," Joyce observed once, on one of these occasions, "but him is fardie."

Mr. Morton looked a little grave over this speech.

"Never mind, my little girl; Reggie is only a baby, and will know his father soon." But I think he was grieved a little when baby hid his naughty little face on my shoulder, and refused to make friends. "Go, go," was all he condescended to observe, in answer to his father's blandishments.

Mrs. Morton seldom came up to the nursery until I was

putting the children to bed, but even then she never stayed for more than ten minutes. There were always visitors below, or it was time to dress for dinner, or there were letters to write. It was evident that Mr. Morton's wife had no sinecure's post. I think no hard-worked seamstress worked harder than Mrs. Morton in those days.

Now and then, when the children were sleeping sweetly in their little cots, and I was reading by the fire, or writing to Aunt Agatha, or busy about some work of my own, I would hear the soft swish of a silk dress in the corridor outside, and there would be Mrs. Morton, looking lovelier than ever, in evening-dress.

"I have just come to kiss my darlings, Merle," she would say. "Dinner is over, and I am going to the theater with some friends; they are waiting for me now, but I had such a longing to see them that I could not resist it."

"It is a bad night for you to go out," I observed once. "Rhoda says it is snowing, and you have a little cough, Travers tells me—"

"Oh, it is nothing," she replied, quickly; "I take cold very easily." But I noticed she shivered a little, and drew her furred mantle closer round her. "How warm and cozy you look here!" glancing round the room, which certainly looked the picture of comfort, with the lamp on the big round table, and Hannah working beside it; and then she took up my book and looked at it. It was a copy of Tennyson's poems that Aunt Agatha had given me on my last birthday.

"If you want books, Merle," she said, kindly, "Mr. Morton has a large library, and I know he would lend you any, if you will only be careful of them. Charles, the under footman, has charge of the room. If you go early in the morning, and write out a list of what you wish, and give it to Travers, I will see you are supplied."

"Thank you; oh, thank you, Mrs. Morton!" I exclaimed, gratefully, for I was fond of reading, and the win-

ter evenings were long, and a book was better company than Hannah, though she was a nice girl, and I never found her in my way. I used to talk to her as we sat at work together. She was a little shy with me at first, but after a time her reserve thawed. She was a farmers' daughter, the youngest but one of twelve children, and her mother was dead. She told me she had five sisters in service, and all doing well; but the eldest, Molly, stayed at home to take care of her father and brothers.

I grew interested at last in Hannah's simple narrative. It was a new experience of life for me, for I had never taken much notice of any servant but Patience before. I liked hearing about Wheeler's Farm, as it was called, the old black-timbered house, with the great pear-tree in the court-yard and the mossy trough out of which the little black pigs drank, and round which strutted the big turkey-cock Gobbler, with his train of wives.

"The court-yard is a pretty sight of a summer's morning," Hannah said once, growing quite rosy with animation, "when Molly comes out with her apron full of corn for the chicks. I do love to see them all coming round her, turkeys, and geese, and chicks, and fowls, and the little bantam cock always in the middle. And there are the pigeons, too, miss; some of them will fly on Molly's shoulder, and eat out of her hand. You should see Luke throw up the tumblers high in the air, and watch them flutter down again on his arms and hands, not minding him more than if he were a branch of the pear-tree itself."

Who was this Luke who was always coming into Hannah's talk? I knew he was not one of the five brothers, for I was acquainted with all their names. I knew quite well that Matthew and Thomas worked on the farm, and that Mark had gone to the village smithy; the twins, Dan and Bob, were still at school, and Dan was lame. Perhaps Luke was engaged to Molly. I hazarded the question once. How Hannah blushed as she answered me!

"Luke is Luke Armstrong, a neighbor's son, but his father is a hard, miserly sort of a man; for all he has Scroggins's Mill, and they do say has many stockings full of guineas. His wife is no better than himself, and his brother Martin bids fair to be the same. It is a wretched home for Luke, and ever since he was a lad he has taken kindly to our place. You see father is hearty, and so is Molly; they like to offer the bit and sup to those as need it, though it is only a bit of bread and cheese or a drop of porridge. Father hates a near man, and he hates old Armstrong like poison."

"Is Luke your sister Molly's sweetheart?" I hazarded after this. Hannah covered her face and began to laugh.

"Please excuse me," she said at last, when her amusement had a little subsided, "but it does sound so droll, Molly having a sweetheart! I am sure she would never think of such a thing. What would father and the boys do without her?"

"Bless me, Hannah!" I returned, a little impatiently, "you have five other sisters, you tell me; surely one of them could help Molly, if she needed it; why, you might go home yourself!"

"Oh, but none of us understand the cows and the poultry and the bees like Molly, unless it is Lydia, and she is dairy-maid up at the Red Farm. They do say Martin Armstrong wants Lydia; but I hope, in spite of his father's guineas, she will have nothing to say to Scroggins's Mill or to Martin. You see, miss," went on Hannah, waxing more confidential as my interest became apparent, "Wheeler's Farm is not a big place, and a lot of children soon crowded it out. Mother was a fine manager, and taught Molly all her ways, but they could not make the attics bigger, and there was not air enough to be healthy for four girls, with a sloping roof and a window not much bigger than your two hands. And then the creeper grew right to the chimneys; and though folk, and especially the

squire, Lyddy's master, said how pretty it was, and called Wheeler's Farm an ornament to the whole parish, it choked up the air somehow; and when Annie took a low fever, Doctor Price lectured mother dreadfully about it. But father would not have the creeper taken down, so mother said there were too many of us at home, and some of us girls ought to go to service. Squire Hawtry always wanted Lydia, and Mrs. Morrison, the vicar's wife, took Emma into the nursery; and Dorcas, she went as maid of all work to old Miss Powell; and Jennie and Lizzie found places down Dorlcote way; but Mrs. Garnett, who knew my father, coaxed him to let me come to London."

"And you are happy here?" I hazarded; but as I looked up from the cambric frill I was hemming, I noticed the girl's head drooped a little.

"Oh, yes, I am happy and comfortable here, miss," she returned, after a moment's hesitation, "for I am fond of children, and it is a pleasant thought that I am saving father my keep, and putting aside a bit of money for a rainy day; but there's no denying that I miss the farm, and Molly, and all the dumb creatures. Why, Jess, the brindled cow, would follow me all down the field, and thrust her wet mouth into my hand if I called her; and as to Rover, Luke's dog—" But here I interrupted her.

"Ah, to be sure! How about your old playfellow, Luke? I suppose you miss him, too?"

Hannah colored but somehow managed to evade my question; but after a week or two her reserve thawed, and I soon learned how matters stood between her and Luke Armstrong.

They were not engaged—she would not allow that for a moment. Why, what would father and Molly say if she were to promise herself to a young fellow who only earned enough for his own keep? For Miller Armstrong was that close that he only allowed his youngest son enough to buy his clothes, and took all his hard work in exchange for

food and shelter, while Martin could help himself to as much money as he chose, only he was pretty nearly as miserly as his father. Molly was always going on at Luke to leave Scroggins's Mill and better himself among strangers, and there was some talk of his coming nearer London, only he was so loath to leave the place where he was born. Well, if she must own it, Luke and she had broken a sixpence between them, and she had promised Luke that she would not listen to any other young man; and she had kept her word, and she was saving her money, because, if Luke ever made a little home for her, she would not like to go to it empty-handed. All the girls were saving money. Lydia had quite a tidy little sum in the savings bank, and that is what made Martin want her for a wife; for though Lydia had saving qualities, she was even plainer than Molly, and no one expected her to have a sweetheart.

I am not ashamed to confess that Hannah's artless talk interested me greatly. True, she was only a servant, but the simplicity and reality of her narrative appealed to my sympathy; the very homeliness of her speech seemed to stamp it more forcibly on my mind. I seemed to picture it all: the low-ceiled attic crowded with girls; the honest farmer and his strapping sons; hard-featured Molly milking her cows and feeding her poultry; young Luke Armstrong and his dog Rover strolling down to Wheeler's Farm for a peep at his rosy-faced sweetheart. Many an evening I banished the insidious advances of homesickness by talking to Hannah of her home, and there were times when I almost envied the girl her wealth of home affection.

It seems to me that we lose a great deal in life by closing our ears and hearts to other people's interests; the more we widen our sympathies, and live in folk's lives, the deeper will be our growth. Some girls simply exist: they never appear to be otherwise than poor sickly plants, and fail to thrust out new feelers in the sunshine.

In those quiet evening hours when I had work to do for my children, and dare not indulge myself in writing to Aunt Agatha, or reading some deeply interesting book that Travers had procured for me that morning, Hannah's innocent rustic talk seemed to open a new door to my inner consciousness, to admit me into a fresh phase of existence. A sentence I had read to Aunt Agatha that Sunday afternoon often haunted me as I listened: "Behold, how green this valley is, also how beautiful with lilies. I have known many laboring men that have got good estates in this Valley of Humiliation;" and I almost held my breath as I remembered that our Lord had been a laboring Man.

Hannah never encroached in any way; she always tacitly acknowledged the difference in our stations, and never presumed on these conversations, but she let me see that she was fond of me by rendering me all sorts of little services; and on my side I tried to be useful to her.

She was very clever at work, and I taught her embroidery. Her handwriting and reading were defective—she had been rather a dunce at school, she told me; and I helped her to improve herself on both these points; further than this I could not go.

I shall never forget my shame one evening when she came into the nursery and found me writing a letter to Aunt Agatha with a dictionary beside me, for there was no trouble to which I would not put myself if I could only avoid paining those loving eyes.

"Why, miss," she exclaimed in an astonished voice, "that is what I am obliged to do when I write to father or Molly! Molly is a fine scholar, and so is Lydia; the hardest words never puzzle them."

I must confess that my face grew hot as I stammered out my explanation to Hannah. I felt that from that night I should lose caste in her eyes, for only an enlightened mind could solve such an enigma; but I need not have been afraid: truth is sometimes revealed to babes.

"I would not fret about it if I were you, miss," observed Hannah, pleasantly; "it seems to me it is only like Saint Paul's thorn in the flesh. Molly says sometimes, when father worries about the cattle or the bad harvest, 'that most people have a messenger of Satan to buffet them;' that is a favorite speech of Molly's. We should not like to be born crooked or lame, as she often tells us; but it might be our lot, for all that, and we should get into heaven just as fast. It is not how we do it, but how we feel when doing it—that is Molly's proverb, and the most of us have our burden to carry some part of the way."

"True, Hannah, and I will carry mine;" but as I spoke the tears were in my eyes, for though her words were true, the thorn was very piercing, and one had to get used to the smart.

CHAPTER VII.

THE FASHION OF THIS WORLD.

I HAVE said that from the first moment I had felt a singular attraction toward my new mistress. As the days went on, and I became better acquainted with the rare beauty and unselfishness of her nature, my respect and affection deepened. I soon grew to love Mrs. Morton as I have loved few people in this life.

My service became literally a service of love; it was with no sense of humiliation that I owned myself her servant; obedience to so gentle a rule was simply a delight. I anticipated her wishes before they were expressed, and an ever-deepening sense of the sacredness and dignity of my charge made me impervious to small slights and moved me to fresh efforts.

I was no longer tormented by my old feelings of uselessness and inefficiency. The despondent fears of my girlhood (and girlhood is often troubled by these unwholesome

fancies), that there was no special work for me in the human vineyard, had ceased to trouble me. I was a bread-winner, and my food tasted all the sweeter for that thought. I was preaching silently day by day my new crusade. Every morning I woke cheerfully to the simple routine of the day's duties. Every night I lay down between my children's cots with a satisfied conscience and a mind at rest, while the soft breathings of the little creatures beside me seemed to lull me to sleep.

It was a strangely quiet life for a girl of two-and-twenty, but I soon grew used to it. When I felt dull I read; at other times I sung over my work, out of pure light-heartedness, and I could hear Joyce's shrill little treble joining in from her distant corner.

"I wish I could sing like you, Merle," Mrs. Morton once said to me, when she had interrupted our duet; "your voice is very sweet and true, and deserves to be cultivated. Since my baby's death my voice has wholly left me."

"It will come back with time and rest," I returned, reassuringly; but she shook her head.

"Rest; that is a word I hardly know. When I was a girl I never knew life would be such a fatiguing thing. There are too many duties for the hours; one tries to fit them in properly, but when night comes the sense of failure haunts one's dreams."

"That is surely a symptom of overwork," was my remark in answer to this.

"Perhaps you are right, but under the circumstances it can not be helped. If only I could be more with my darlings, and enjoy their pretty ways; but at least it is a comfort to me to know they have so faithful a nurse in my absence."

She was always making these little speeches to me; it was one of her gracious ways. She could be grateful to a servant for doing her duty. She was not one of those peo-

ple who take everything as a matter of course, who treat their domestics and hirelings as though they were mere machines for the day's work; on the contrary, she recognized their humanity; she would sympathize as tenderly with a sick footman or a kitchen-maid in trouble as she would with any of her richer neighbors. It was this large-mindedness and beneficence that made her household worship her. When I learned more about her former life, I marveled at her grand self-abnegation. I grew to understand that from the day of her marriage she had simply effaced herself for her husband's sake; her tastes, her favorite pursuits, had all been resigned without a murmur, that she might lead his life.

She had been a simple country girl when he married her; her bees, her horse, and her father's dogs had been her great interests; to ride with her father over his farms had been her chief delight. She had often risen with the lark, and was budding her roses amid the dews.

When the young rising politician, Alick Morton, had first met her at a neighboring squire's house, her sweet bloom and unconscious beauty won him in spite of himself, and from the first hour of their meeting he vowed to himself that Violet Cheriton should be his wife.

No greater change had ever come to a woman. In spite of her great love, there must have been times when Violet Morton looked back on her innocent and happy girlhood with something like regret, if ever a true-hearted wife and mother permits herself to indulge in such a feeling.

Mr. Morton was a devoted husband, but he was an autocrat, and, in spite of many fine qualities, was not without that selfishness that leavens many a man's nature. He wanted his wife to himself; his busy ambition aimed high; politics was the breath of his life; unlike other men in this, that he lived to work, instead of working to live.

These natures know no fatigue; they are intolerant of difficulties; inaction means death to them. Mr. Morton

was a committee man; he worked hard for his party. He was a philanthropist also, and took up warmly certain public charities. His name was becoming widely known; people spoke of him as a rising man who would be useful to his generation. If he dragged his wife at his triumphal chariot wheel, no one blamed him; this class of men need real helpmates. In these cases the stronger nature rules: the weaker and most loving submits.

Mrs. Morton was a submissive wife; early and late she toiled in her husband's service; their house was a rallying point for his party. On certain occasions the great drawing-rooms were flung open to strangers; meetings were held on behalf of the charities in which Mr. Morton was interested; there were speeches made, in which he largely distinguished himself, while his wife hovered on the outskirts of the crowd and listened to him.

He kept no secretary, and his correspondence was immense. Mrs. Morton had a clear, characteristic handwriting, and could write rapidly to dictation, and many an hour was spent in her husband's study.

This was at first no weariness to her—she loved to be beside him and share his labors. What wife begrudges time and work for her husband? But she soon found that other labors supervened that were less congenial to her.

Mr. Morton was overworked; the demands on his time were unceasing. Violet must visit the wards of his favorite hospitals, and help him in keeping the accounts. She must represent him in society, and kept up constant intercourse with the wives of the members of their party during the season. She worked harder even than he did. Her bloom faded under the withering influence of late hours and hot rooms. Night after night she bore, with sweet graciousness, the weary round of pleasures that palled on her. It was a martyrdom of human love; for, alas! in the hurry of this unsatisfactory life, the Divine voice had grown dim and far off to the weary ear of Violet

Morton; the clanging metallic earth bells had deadened the heavenly harmonies.

Sometimes a sad, pathetic look would come into her eyes. Was she thinking, I wonder, of the slim, bright-eyed girl budding roses in the old-fashioned garden, while the brown bees hummed round her? Was the fragrance of the lilies—those tall white lilies of which she so often spoke to me—blotting out the perfume of hot-house flowers and the heavy scents of the crowded ball-room?

It was a matter of intense surprise to me that Mr. Morton seemed perfectly unconscious of this immense self-sacrifice. He could not be ignorant, surely, that a mother desires to be with her children, and that a woman's tender frame is susceptible to fatigue. Selfish as he was, he loved her too well to impose such intolerable burdens on her strength, if he had only known them to be burdens. But her cheerfulness blinded him. How could he know she was overtasked, and often sad at heart, when she never complained, when she sealed her lips so generously?

If she had once said, "I am so tired, Alick; I can not write for you," he would at once have pressed her to rest; but men are so dense, as Aunt Agatha says. Their great minds overlook little details. They take in wide vistas of landscape, and never see the little nettles that are choking up the field path. Women would have noticed the nettles at once, and spied out the gap in the hedge beside.

I had not been many weeks in the house before I found Sunday was no day of rest to my employers, and yet they were better than many other worldly people. Mrs. Morton always went to church in the morning, and, unless he were too tired or busy, Mr. Morton went too. They were careful, too, that their servants should enjoy as far as possible the privileges of the day. The carriage was never used, so the horses and the coachman were able to rest. They dined an hour earlier, and invited only one or two intimate friends to join them, and there was always sacred

music in the evening. But there was no more leisure for thought on that day than on any other. In the afternoon Mr. Morton wrote his letters and read his paper, and Mrs. Morton had her share of correspondence; the rest of the afternoon was given to callers, or Mrs. Morton accompanied her husband for a walk in the park. She was always very careful of her toilet on these occasions, and if it were Travers's Sunday out, my services were in requisition. I had once offered to assist her, and I suppose I had given satisfaction. More than once Mr. Morton had found fault with some part of her dress, and she had gone back to her dressing-room with the utmost promptitude to change it.

"I have not satisfied my husband's taste, Merle," she would say, as cheerfully as possible: "will you help me to do better?" And she would stand before the glass with such a tired look on her lovely face, as I brought her a fresh mantle and bonnet.

I hate men to be overcritical with their wives, but I suppose it is a greater compliment than not being able to see if they are wearing their best or common bonnet. I confess it must be trying to a woman when a man says—and how often he does say it!—"What a pretty gown that is, my dear. Have I seen it before?" when the aggravating creature must know that she wore it all last summer, and perhaps the previous summer too.

I found out that Mrs. Morton was ill-satisfied with the way they spent Sundays.

I remember one Sunday evening I was sitting in the twilight with Reggie on my lap and Joyce on her little stool beside me. I had been teaching her a new verse of her hymn, and she had learned to say it very prettily. We were both very busy over it, when the door opened, and Mrs. Morton came in.

Joyce jumped up and ran to her at once.

"I know it, mother—my Sunday hymn—it is such a pretty one."

"Is it, my darling? Then suppose you let mother hear it." And Joyce, folding her hands in her quaint, old-fashioned way, began very readily:

"'I love to hear the story
Which angel voices tell,
How once the King of Glory
Came down on earth to dwell.
I am both weak and sinful,
But this I surely know,
The Lord came down to save me,
Because He loved me so.'"

"Very pretty, indeed, Joyce," observed Mrs. Morton, rather absently, when the child had finished. But Joyce looked up in her face wistfully.

"Do you ever say hymns, mother dear?"

"I sing them in church, my pet."

"But you never teached them to me, mother; they are all nurse's hymns, the little one and the long one, and the little wee hymn I say with my prayers. Would you like to hear my little wee hymn, mother dear?"

"I will hear all you know, my darling." But there were tears in the beautiful eyes as she listened.

"How nicely she says them! I am glad you teach her such pretty hymns, Merle," as the child ran off to fetch Snap, who was whining for admittance. "Somehow it seems more like the Sunday of old times up here—so quiet, so peaceful. We must do as the world does, I suppose; but these secular, bustling Sundays are not to my taste."

Her words jarred on me, and I replied rather too quickly, considering my position, "Are we obliged to follow a bad fashion? That is indeed going with the crowd to do evil."

She looked up in some surprise. It must have been a

new thing to the petted mistress of the household to hear herself so sharply rebuked.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," I exclaimed, penitently; "I had no right to say that; I forgot to whom I was speaking."

"Do not distress yourself, Merle," she returned, in her sweet way; "it is good for all of us to hear the truth sometimes. It was foolish of me to say that. I only mean that in our house it is very difficult not to follow the world's custom."

"Very difficult, indeed," I acquiesced; but she continued to look at me thoughtfully.

"Do not be afraid of saying what is in your mind; you may speak to me plainly, if you will. You are my children's nurse, but I can not forget that in many ways we are equals. You never intrude this fact on my notice, but it is none the less apparent. I know our Sundays are terribly secular," as I continued silent; "sometimes I wish it were not so, for my children's sake."

"Not for your own sake, Mrs. Morton?"

A distressed look came over her face.

"I seem to have no time to wish for anything."

"I could well believe that; but, Mrs. Morton, it seems to me as though we owe some duty to ourselves. If we neglect the highest part of ourselves we are committing a sort of mental suicide. How often has Aunt Agatha told me that!"

"How do you mean?" she asked, anxiously.

"We all need a quiet time for thought. It always seems to me that on Sunday one lays down one's burdens for a time. It is such a rest to shut out the world for one day in the week, to forget the harass of one's work, to take up higher duties, to lift one's standard afresh, and prove one's armor. It is just like abiding in the tents for shelter and rest in the heat of battle."

I had forgotten the difference in our station, and was

talking to my mistress just as though she were Aunt Agatha. Something seemed to compel me to speak; I felt a strange sort of trouble oppressing me, as though I saw a beautiful soul wandering out of the way. She seemed moved at my words, and it was several minutes before she spoke again.

"Your words recall the old Sundays at my own dear home," she observed, presently. "Do you not love Sundays in the country, Merle? The very birds seem to sing more sweetly, and the stillness of which you speak seems in the very air. My Sundays were very different then. We lived near the church, and we could hear the chiming of the bells as we walked through the village. I taught in the Sunday-school; I recollect some of the children's names now. Father always liked us to go to the evening service. I remember, too, we invariably sung Bishop Ken's evening hymn. One evening a little robin found its way into the church. I remember Mr. Andrews, our vicar, was just reading that verse, "Yea, the sparrow hath found her a house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young," when we looked up and saw the little creature fluttering round the chancel. Oh, those sweet old Sundays!" And here she broke off and sighed.

I thought it best to say no more, and leave her to those tender memories. A word in season may do much, but I was young, and had no right to teach with authority. I suppose she understood my reticence, for she looked at me very kindly as she rose from her seat.

"It does me good to come up here, Merle; I always have a more rested feeling when I go down to my duties. If I did not feel that they were real duties that called me, I should be very unhappy."

She bade her children good-night, and left the nursery. What made me take up my Bible, I wonder, and read the following verse? "In this thing the Lord pardon thy servant, that when my master goeth into the house of Rimmon

to worship there, and he leaneth on my hand, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon thy servant this thing."

CHAPTER VIII.

"LABORARE EST ORARE."

My mistress (how I loved to call her by that name!) was beginning to give me her confidence. In a little while I grew quite at my ease with her.

She would sit down sometimes and question me about the book I was reading, or, if we talked of the children, she would ask my opinion of them in a way that showed she respected it.

She told me more than once that her husband was quite satisfied with me; the children thrived under my care, Reggie especially, for Joyce was somewhat frail and delicate. It gratified me to hear this, for a longer acquaintance with Mr. Morton had not lessened my sense of awe in his presence (I had had to feel the pressure of his strong will before I had been many weeks in his house, and though I had submitted to his enforced commands, they had cost me my only tears of humiliation, and yet all the time I knew he was perfectly just in his demands). The occasion was this.

It was a rule that when visitors asked to see the children —a very frequent occurrence when Mrs. Morton received at home—that the head nurse should bring them into the blue drawing-room, as it was called. On two afternoons I had shirked this duty. With all my boasted courage, the idea of facing all those strangers was singularly obnoxious; I chose to consider myself privileged to infringe this part of my office. I dressed the children carefully, and bade Hannah take them to their mother. I thought the girl looked at me and hesitated a moment, but her habitual respect kept her silent.

My dereliction of duty escaped notice on the first afternoon; Mr. Morton was occupied with a committee, and Mrs. Morton was too gentle and considerate to hint that my presence was desired, but on the second afternoon Hannah came up looking a little flurried.

Master had not seemed pleased somehow; he had spoken quite sharply before the visitors, and asked where nurse was, that she had not brought the children as usual, and the mistress had looked uncomfortable, and had beckoned him to her.

I took no notice of Hannah's speech, for I had a hasty tongue, and might have said things that I should have regretted afterward, but my temper was decidedly ruffled. I took Reggie as quickly as possible from her arms, and carried him off into the other room. I wanted to be alone and recover myself.

I cried a good deal, much to Reggie's distress; he kept patting my cheeks and calling to me to kiss him, so that at last I was obliged to leave off. I had indeed met with a difficulty. I could hear the roaring of the chained lions behind me, but I said to myself that I would not be beaten; if my pride must suffer, I should get over the unpleasantness in time. Why should I be afraid of people just because they wore silks and satins and were strangers to me? My fears were undignified and absurd; Mr. Morton was right; I had shirked my duty.

I hoped that nothing more would be said about it, and I determined that the following Thursday I would face the ordeal; but I was not to escape so easily.

When Mrs. Morton came into the nursery that evening to bid the children good-night, I thought she looked a little preoccupied. She kissed them, and asked me, rather nervously, to follow her into the night nursery.

"Merle," she said, rather hurriedly, "I hope you will not mind what I am going to say. My husband has asked me to speak to you. He seemed a little put out this after-

noon; it did not please him that Hannah should take your place with the children."

"Hannah told me so when she came up, Mrs. Morton."

In spite of all my efforts to restrain my temper, I am afraid my voice was a little sullen. I had never answered her in such a tone before. I would obey Mr. Morton; I knew my own position well enough for that, but they should both see that this part of my duty was distasteful to me.

To my intense surprise she took my hand and held it gently.

"I was afraid you would feel it in this way, Merle, but I want you to look upon it from another point of view. You know that my husband forewarned you that your position would entail difficulties. Hitherto things have been quite smooth; now comes a duty which you own by your manner to be bitterly distasteful. I sympathize with you, but my husband's wishes are sacred; he is very particular on this point. Do you think for my sake that you could yield in this?"

She still held my hand, and I own that the foolish feeling crossed me that I was glad that she should know my hand was as soft as hers, but as she spoke to me in that beseeching voice all sullenness left me.

"There is very little that I would not do for your sake, Mrs. Morton, when you have been so good to me. Please do not say another word about it. Mr. Morton was right; I have been utterly in the wrong; I feel that now. Next Thursday I will bring down the children into the drawing-room."

She thanked me so warmly that she made me feel still more ashamed of myself; it seemed such a wonderful thing that my mistress should stoop to entreat where she could by right command, but she was very tolerant of a girl's waywardness. She did not leave me even then, but changed the subject. She sat down and talked to me for

a few minutes about myself and Aunt Agatha. I had not been home yet, and she wanted me to fix some afternoon when Mrs. Garnett or Travers could take my place.

"We must not let you get too dull, Merle," she said, gently. "Hannah is a good girl, but she can not be a companion to you in any sense of the word." And perhaps in that she was right.

I woke the following Thursday with a sense of uneasiness oppressing me, so largely do our small fears magnify themselves when indulged. As the afternoon approached I grew quite pale with apprehension, and Hannah, with unspoken sympathy—she had wonderful tact for a girl—only hinted at the matter in a roundabout way.

I had dressed Reggie in his turquois-blue velvet and was fastening my clean frilled apron over my black gown, when Hannah said, quietly, "Well, it is no wonder master likes to show people what sort of nurse he has got. I don't think any one could look so nice in a cap and apron as you do, Miss Fenton. It is just as though you were making believe to be a servant like me, and it would not do anyhow."

I smiled a little at Hannah's homely compliment, but I confess it pleased me and gave me courage. I felt still more like myself when my boy put his dimpled arms round my neck, and hid his dear face on my shoulder. I could not persuade him to loosen his hold until his mother spoke to him; and there was Joyce holding tightly to my gown all the time.

The room was so full that it almost made me giddy. It was good of Mrs. Morton to rise from her seat and meet me, but all her coaxing speeches would not make Reggie do more than raise his head from my shoulder. He sat in my arms like a baby prince, beating off every one with his little hands, and refusing even to go to his father.

Every one wanted to kiss him, and I carried him from one to another. Joyce had left me at once for her mother.

Some of the ladies questioned me about the children. They spoke very civilly, but their inquisitive glances made my face burn, and it was with difficulty that I made suitable replies. Once I looked up, and saw that Mr. Morton was watching me. His glance was critical, but not unkind. I had a feeling then that he was subjecting me purposely to this test. I must carry out my theory into practice. I am convinced all this was in his mind as he looked at me, and I no longer bore a grudge against him.

Not long afterward I had an opportunity of learning that he could own himself fallible on some points. He was exceedingly just, and could bear a rebuke even from an inferior, if it proved him to be clearly in the wrong.

One afternoon he came into the nursery to play with the children for a few minutes. He would wind up their mechanical toys to amuse them. Reggie was unusually fretful, and nothing seemed to please him. He scolded both his father and his walking doll, and would have nothing to say to the learned dog who beat the timbrels and nodded his head approvingly to his own music. Presently he caught sight of his favorite woolly lamb placed out of his reach on the mantel-piece, and began screaming and kicking.

"Naughty Reggie," observed his father, complacently, and he was taking down the toy when I begged him respectfully to replace it.

He looked at me in some little surprise.

"I thought he was crying for it," he said, somewhat perplexed at this.

"Reggie must not cry for things after that fashion," I returned, firmly, for I felt a serious principle was involved here. "He is only a baby, but he is very sensible, and knows he is naughty when he screams for a thing. I never give it to him until he is good."

"Indeed," a little dryly. "Well, he seems far off from

goodness now. What do you mean by making all that noise, my boy?"

Reggie was in one of his passions, it was easy to see that; the toy would have been flung to the ground in his present mood; so, without looking at his father or asking his permission, I resorted to my usual method, and laid him down screaming lustily in his little cot.

"There baby must stop until he is good," I remarked, quietly; and I took my work and sat down at some little distance, while Mr. Morton watched us from the other room. I knew my plan always answered with Reggie, and the storm would soon be over.

In two or three minutes his screams ceased, and I heard a penitent "Gurgle do;" then "Nur, nur." I went to him directly, and in a moment he held out his arms to be lifted out of the cot.

"Is Reggie quite good?" I asked, as I kissed him.

"Ood, ood," was the triumphant reply, and the next moment he was cuddling his lamb.

"I own your method is the best, nurse," observed Mr. Morton, pleasantly. "My boy will not be spoiled, I see that. I confess I should have given him the toy directly he screamed for it; you showed greater wisdom than his father."

It is impossible to say how much this speech gratified me. From that moment I liked as well as respected Mr. Morton.

My first holiday arrived somewhat unexpectedly. A little before the nursery dinner Travers brought a message from Mrs. Morton that Joyce was to go out with her in the carriage, and that if I liked to have the afternoon and evening to myself, Mrs. Garnett could take charge of Reggie.

The offer was too tempting to be refused. I do not think I ever knew the meaning of the word holiday before.

No school-girl felt in greater spirits than I did during dinner-time.

It was a lovely April afternoon. I took out of my wardrobe a soft gray merino—my best dress—and a little gray velvet bonnet that Aunt Agatha's skillful hands had made for me. I confess I looked at myself with some complacency. "No one would take me for a nurse," I thought.

In the hall I encountered Mr. Morton; he was just going out. For the moment he did not recognize me. He removed his hat hurriedly; no doubt he thought me a stranger.

I could not help smiling at his mistake, and then he said, rather awkwardly: "I did not know you, Miss Fenton. I am glad you have such a lovely afternoon for your holiday; there seems a look of spring in the air," all very civilly, but with his keen eyes taking in every particular of my dress.

I heard from Mrs. Garnett afterward that he very much approved of Miss Fenton's quiet, lady-like appearance; and as he was a very fastidious man, this was considered high praise. There was more than a touch of spring in the air; the delicious softness seemed to promise opening buds. Down Exhibition Road the flower-girls were busy with their baskets of snowdrops and violets. I bought a few for Aunt Agatha, then I remembered that Uncle Keith had a weakness for a particular sort of scone, and I bought some and a slice of rich Dundee seed-cake. I felt like a school-girl providing a little home feast; but how pleasant it is to cater for those we love! I was glad when my short journey was over, and I could see the river shimmering a steely blue in the spring sunshine. The old church towers seemed more venerable and picturesque. As I walked down High Street I looked at the well-known shops with an interest I never felt before.

When I reached the cottage I rang very softly, that

Aunt Agatha should not be disturbed. Patience uttered a pleased exclamation when she caught sight of me. "Is it really yourself, Miss Merle? I could hardly believe my eyes. Mistress is in there reading," pointing to the drawing-room. "She has not heard the bell, I'll be bound, so you can surprise her finely."

I acted on Patience's hint, and opened the door noiselessly. How cozy the room looked in the fire-light! and could any sight be more pleasant to my eyes than dear Aunt Agatha sitting in her favorite low chair, in her well-worn black silk and pretty lace cap? I shall never forget her look of delight when she saw me.

"Merle! Oh, you dear child, do you mean it is really you? Come here and let me look at you. I want to see what seven weeks of hard work has done for you."

But Aunt Agatha's eyes were very dim as she looked.

"There, sit down, and get warm," giving me an energetic little push, "and tell me all about it. Your letters never do you justice, Merle. I must hear your experience from your own lips."

What a talk that was! It lasted all the afternoon, until Patience came in to set the tea-table, and we heard Uncle Keith's boots on the scraper; even that sound was musical to me. When he entered the room I gave him a good hug, and had put some of my violets in his button-hole long before he had left off saying "Hir-rumph" in his surprise.

"She looks well, Agatha, does she not?" he observed, as we gathered round the tea-table. "So the scheme has held out for seven weeks, eh? You have not come to tell us you are tired of being a nurse?"

"No, indeed," I returned, indignantly. "I am determined to prove to you and the whole world that my theory is a sensible one. I am quite happy in my work—perfectly happy, Uncle Keith. I would not part with my children for worlds. Joyce is so amusing, and as for Reg-

gie, he is such a darling that I could not live without him."

"It is making a woman of Merle, I can see that," observed Aunt Agatha, softly. "I confess I did not like the plan at first, but if you make it answer, child, you will have me for a convert. You look just as nice and just as much a lady as you did when you were leading a useless life here. Never mind if in time your hands grow a little less soft and white; that is a small matter if your heart expands and your conscience is satisfied. You remember your favorite motto, Merle?"

"Yes, indeed, Aunt Agatha, *Laborare est orare.* Now I must go, for Uncle Keith is pulling out his watch, which means I have to catch my train."

But as I trudged over the bridge beside him in the starlight, and saw the faint gleams lying on the dark, shadowy river, a voice seemed to whisper to my inner consciousness, "Courage, Merle; a good beginning makes a glad ending. Hold fast to your motto, *Laborare est orare.*"

CHAPTER IX.

BERENGARIA.

THE bright spring days found me a close prisoner to the house. The end of April had been unusually chilly, and one cold rainy night Reggie was taken with an attack of croup.

It was a very severe attack, and for an hour or two my alarm was excessive. Mrs. Morton was at a fancy ball, and Mr. Morton was attending a late debate, and, to add to my trouble, Mrs. Garnett, who would at once have come to my assistance, was confined to her bed with a slight illness.

Travers had no experience in these cases, and her presence was perfectly useless. Hannah, frightened and half awake as she was, was far more helpful. Happily Ander-

son was still up, and he undertook at once to go for the doctor, adding, of his own accord, that he would go round to the stables on his return, and send the carriage off for his mistress. "She is not expected home until three, and it is only half past one, but she would never forgive us if she were not fetched as quickly as possible."

I thanked Anderson, and begged Hannah to replenish the bath with hot water. Happily, I knew what remedies to use; my former experience in my school-fellow's nursery proved useful to me now. I remembered how the doctor had approved of what I had done, and I resolved to do exactly the same for Reggie. Frightened as I was, I am thankful to know my fears did not impede my usefulness; I did all I could to relieve my darling, and Hannah seconded my efforts. I am sure Travers wished with all her heart to help us, but she had no nerve, and her lamentable voice made me a trifle impatient.

It was a great relief when Anderson appeared with Dr. Myrtle. He waited for a few minutes, to hear from the doctor that all danger had been averted by the prompt remedies, and then he went in search of Stephenson. It was some time before we heard the sound of carriage wheels.

Reggie was still wrapped in a blanket on my lap, and had just fallen asleep, worn out by the violence of the remedies still more than by the attack. Dr. Myrtle whispered to me not to move, as he would speak to Mrs. Morton down-stairs, and enforce on her the need of quiet. It would have been grievous to wake the exhausted little creature, and I was quite content to sit holding him in my lap until morning, if Dr. Myrtle thought it was well for me to do so.

I had forgotten all about the fancy ball, and my start when I saw Mrs. Morton standing in the door-way almost woke Reggie. I really thought for a moment that I was dreaming. I learned afterward that she had taken the

character of Berengaria, wife of the lion-hearted Richard, out for the moment I was too confused to identify her. She was dressed in dark-blue velvet, and her gown and mantle were trimmed with ermine; she wore a glittering belt that looked as though it were studded with brilliants, and her brown hair hung in loose braids and plaits under a gold coronet. As she swept noiselessly toward us, I could see the tears were running down her cheeks, and her bosom was heaving under her ermine.

"Oh, Merle!" she whispered, in a voice of agony, as she knelt down beside us, "to think my boy was in danger, and his mother was decked out in this fool's garb; it makes me sick only to remember it; oh, my baby, my baby!" and she leaned her head against my arm and sobbed, not loudly, but with the utmost bitterness.

"Dear Mrs. Morton," I returned, gently, "it was not your fault; no one could have foreseen this. Reggie had a little cold, but I thought it was nothing. Oh, what are you doing?" for she had actually kissed me, not once, but twice.

"Let me do it, Merle," returned my sweet mistress; "I am so grateful to you, and so will my husband be when he knows all. Doctor Myrtle says he never saw a nurse who understood her duties so well; everything had been done for the child before he came."

"Oh, Aunt Agatha, if only you and Uncle Keith had heard that!"

We had talked in whispers, but nothing seemed to disturb Reggie. A moment after Mr. Morton came hurriedly into the nursery; he was very pale and discomposed, and a sort of shock seemed to pass over him as he saw his wife.

"Violet," he whispered, as she clung to him in a passion of weeping, "this has unnerved you, but indeed Doctor Myrtle says our boy will do well. My darling, will you not try to comfort yourself?"

"I was at Lady S——'s ball when Muriel, our precious baby—oh, you remember, Alick"—for she seemed unable to go on. Poor woman! no wonder her tears flowed at such a memory. Mrs. Garnett told me reluctantly, when I questioned her the next day, that baby Muriel had been taken with a fit when Mrs. Morton and her husband were at a ball, and the mother had only arrived in time to see the infant breathe its last.

"Yes, yes," he said, soothing her, "but nothing could have saved her, you know. Doctor Myrtle told you so; and you were only spared the pain of seeing her suffer. Try to be sensible about it, my dearest; our baby has been ill, but everything has been done for him; and now he is relieved, poor little fellow. We have to thank you for that, Miss Fenton. How nicely you are holding him! he looks as comfortable as possible," touching the boy's cheek with his forefinger. "Now, my love, let me relieve you of this cumbrous thing," taking off her coronet; "this mantle will unfasten, too, I see. Now, suppose you put on your dressing-gown, and ask Travers to make you and Miss Fenton some tea. I will not be so cruel as to tell you to go to bed"—as she looked at him pleadingly. "If you were a wise woman you would go, but I suppose I must humor you; but you must get rid of all this frippery."

"Oh, Alick, how good you are!" she said, gratefully; and in a few minutes more she returned in her warm, quilted dressing-gown, with her hair simply braided; she looked even more beautiful than she had done as Berengaria.

Mr. Morton soon left us after placing his wife in my charge. The night passed very quickly away after that. When Reggie stirred I put him in his cot, and begged Mrs. Morton to lie down on the bed beside him. She did not refuse: emotion had exhausted her, but her eyes never closed. She told me long afterward she dared not sleep,

lest the old dream should torment her of the dead baby's hand, that she could never warm with all her efforts.

"I can feel it quite icy cold in mine, and sometimes there is a cold face on my bosom, but nothing ever warms them, and when I wake up I am shivering too."

I could not tell what was passing through the poor mother's mind, but I did not like the feverish look in her wide, distended eyes. Mr. Morton was right, and the shock of her boy's illness had utterly unnerved her. I thought, perhaps she was blaming herself needlessly; and yet never was there a human being more utterly devoid of vanity and selfishness; she was simply sacrificing her maternal duties to her husband's ambition; of her own accord she would never have entered a ball-room: I am sure of that.

I longed to soothe her, and yet I hardly knew what to say. Presently she shivered, and I covered her up carefully with all the wraps I could find, and then knelt down and chafed her hands.

"You can not sleep, Mrs. Morton; I am so sorry, and yet you are tired out."

"I do not want to sleep," she answered. "I dream badly sometimes, and I would rather lie awake and listen to my boy's breathing; he is sleeping nicely, Merle."

"Yes, indeed; there is no need for anxiety now, and I am watching him carefully."

"Oh, I can trust you," with a faint smile; "I trusted you from the first moment. But, my poor girl, I am afraid you are very tired, and I have taken your bed from you."

"I would rather see you resting there, Mrs. Morton."

"Do you think you could read to me a little? My husband often reads to me when I am nervous and can not sleep. Anything will do, the simplest child's story; it is just the sound of the voice that soothes me. What is that book? Oh, the Bible! I am afraid I do not read that

enough, I have so little time to myself, and then I am often too tired."

"It is just the book for tired people," I returned; "if you want a story. I think the history of Ruth is one of the most touching: she has always seemed to me one of the sweetest characters in the Bible; it is a perfect idyl of Oriental life."

"It is so long since I have read it," she returned, apologetically, "you shall read it to me if you like." And I read the whole book throughout to her, only pausing now and then to look at Reggie.

She listened to it without interrupting me once, but I was rejoiced to see that the strained expression had passed out of her eyes; they looked more natural.

"You are right, Merle," she observed, when I had finished, "it is very beautiful and touching; that was something like love, 'Where thou goest I will go.' Now you may read me a psalm, if you are not tired. I like your voice, it is so clear and quiet."

I read to her until she bade me stop; and then we talked a little. I told her an incident or two in my school-days about our nutting expeditions in the Luttrell woods, and how one of our party had strayed and had encountered a gypsy caravan. I was just in the middle of Rose Mervyn's recital, when I heard measured breathing. She had fallen asleep.

I saw a great deal of Mrs. Morton during the next few days. She was very unwell, and Dr. Myrtle insisted on her giving up all her engagements for a week. He spoke very decidedly, and Mr. Morton was obliged to yield to his opinion; but he seemed a little put out.

"It is such a pity all those people should be disappointed," he observed, in a grumbling voice. "Mrs. Granville had quite set her heart on having us both on Thursday. I knew how it would be when you fretted yourself ill last night."

"I could not help it," she pleaded. "Anderson gave me such a fright; of course, he thought his coming for me was the best, but when I saw his face I thought I should have died with fear."

"Nonsense, Violet; you ought to learn more self-control; you know I dislike to see you give way so entirely. Well, we must abide by Doctor Myrtle's orders, and treat you as an invalid."

"But, Alick," detaining him as he was turning away, not in the best of humors, as I could see from the night nursery, "I can write for you all the same; the library is quite warm."

"How absurd!" was the reply. "Do you think I should let you tire yourself for me? I hope I am not quite so selfish, my dear child;" for she was still holding his arm beseechingly. "You must really let me go, for I am dreadfully busy; rest yourself and get well, that is all I ask of you;" and he kissed her and left the room. He was not often hasty with her, but he was overworked and irritable.

We made the most of that week between us. Reggie soon recovered, and as long as he was kept in a certain temperature, and carefully watched, gave us no further anxiety.

His mother took entire charge of him during that week; she came up to the nursery as soon as she was dressed, and stayed with us until Reggie was in bed and Travers came to summon her. She even took her meals with us. Dr. Myrtle thought she was suffering from a chill, and the warm nursery was just the right temperature for her. It was a lovely sight to watch her with her children. I think even Mr. Morton was struck by the beauty of the scene when he came up one afternoon and found her sitting in her easy-chair with Reggie on her lap and Joyce standing beside her.

"You seem all very happy together," he said, as he

took up his position on the rug. I had retreated with my work into the other room, but I could hear her answer distinctly.

"Oh, Alick, it has been such a happy week—a real holiday; it was worth being ill, to see so much of the children; Reggie has such pretty ways; I knew so little about him before. He can say 'fada' quite plainly."

"Indeed, my boy, then suppose you say your new words."

"Do you know what I have been wishing all this week?" she continued, when Reggie had finished his vocabulary, and had been taken into his father's arms.

"No, my dear," sitting down beside her, "unless you wished for me to be a Cabinet minister."

"Oh, no, Alick," and there was pain in her voice, "not unless you wish it very much too: I had a very different desire from that."

"Perhaps you were longing for a house in the country; well, that may come by and by."

"Wrong again, Alick. I was wishing that you were a poor man—not a very poor man, I should not like that—and that we lived in a small house with a pretty garden, where there would be a lawn for the children to play on, and plenty of flowers for them to pick."

"Indeed; this is a strange wish of yours, you discontented woman."

"No, not discontented, but very, very happy, dear; so you need not frown over my poor little wish; every one builds castles, only mine is not a castle, but a cottage."

"I should not care to live in your cottage, Violet; I am an ambitious man. The Cabinet would be more to my taste."

"Yes, dear," with a sigh; "it was only make-believe nonsense;" and she did not say another word about that fancy of hers, but began questioning him about last night's debate. That was just her way, to forget herself and fol-

low his bent. No wonder he could not do without her, and was restless and ill at ease if she were unavoidably absent.

I wonder he understood in the least what she meant by wishing him to be poor. No doubt her innocent fancy had constructed a home where no uncongenial anxieties or ambition should sever her from her children, where she should be all in all to them as well as to her husband.

I dare say she imagined herself no longer burdened with wearisome receptions, but sitting working in the shade of the little porch while her children made daisy chains on the lawn of that humble abode. The mother would undress her children, and hear them say their little prayers. Hark! was not that a click of the gate? Father has come home. How late you are, Alick; the children are asleep; you must kiss them without waking them. Hush, what nonsense she is dreaming! Alick would be in the Cabinet; people were prophesying that already. She must take up her burden again and follow him up the steep hill of fame. What if her woman's heart fainted sometimes! women must do their work in life, as she would do hers.

The next day the mother's place was empty in the nursery. "Mrs. Morton was with her husband in the library," Travers told us. Later on we heard she was driving. Just as I was putting Reggie, half asleep, in his cot, she came up to wish the children good-night, but she did not stay with us ten minutes. I remarked that she looked very ill and exhausted.

"Oh, I am only a little tired," she returned, hurriedly; "I have been paying calls all the afternoon, trying to make up for my idle week, and the talking has tired me. Never mind, it is all in the day's work." And she nodded to me kindly and left the room.

CHAPTER X.

"I TRUST THEM TO YOU, MERLE."

WITH the early summer came a new anxiety; Joyce was growing very fast, and, like other children of her age, looked thin and delicate. She lost her appetite, grew captious and irritable, had crying fits if she were contradicted, and tired of all her playthings. It was hard work to amuse her; and as Reggie was rather fretful with the heat, I found my charge decidedly onerous, especially as it was the height of the season, and Mrs. Morton's daily visits to the nursery barely lasted ten minutes.

Dr. Myrtle was called in, and recommended change for both the children. There was a want of tone about Joyce; she was growing too fast, and there was slight irritability of the brain, a not uncommon thing, he remarked, with nervous, delicately organized children.

He recommended sea air and bathing. She must be out on the shore all day, and run wild. Fresh air, new milk, and country diet would be her best medicine; and, as Dr. Myrtle was an oracle in our household, Mr. Morton at once decided that his advice must be followed.

There was a long, anxious deliberation between the parents, and the next morning I was summoned to Mrs. Morton's dressing-room. I found her lying on the couch; the blinds were lowered, and the smelling salts were in her hand. She said at once that she had had a restless night, and had one of her bad headaches. I thought she looked wretchedly ill, and, for the first time, the fear crossed me that her life was killing her by inches. Hers was not a robust constitution—and, like Joyce, she was most delicately organized. Late hours and excitement are fatal to these nervous constitutions, if only I dared hint at this to Dr. Myrtle—but I felt, in my position, it would be an act

of presumption. She would not let me speak of herself; at my first word of sympathy she stopped me.

"Never mind about me, I am used to these headaches; sit down a moment; I want to speak to you about the children. Doctor Myrtle has made us very anxious about Joyce; he says she must have change at once."

"He said the same to me, Mrs. Morton."

"My husband and I have talked the matter over; if I could only go with you and the children—but no, it is impossible. How could I leave just now, when our ball is coming off on the eighteenth, and we have two dinners as well? Besides, I could not leave my husband; he is far from well. This late session tries him dreadfully. I have never left him yet, not even for a day."

"And yet you require the change as much as the children." I could not help saying this; but she took no notice of my remark.

"We have decided to send them to my father's. Do you know Netherton, Merle? It is a pretty village about a mile from Orton-on-Sea. Netherton is by the sea, and the air is nearly as fine as Orton. Marshlands, that is my father's place, is about half a mile from the shore."

I heard this with some trepidation. In my secret heart I had hoped that we should have taken lodgings at some watering-place, and I thought, with Hannah's help, I should have got on nicely; but to go among strangers! I was perfectly unaware of Mr. Morton's horror of lodgings, and it would have seemed absurd to him to take a house just for me and the children.

"I have written to my sister, Merle," she continued, "to make all arrangements. My father never interferes in domestic matters. I have told her that I hold you responsible for my children, and that you will have the sole charge of them. I laid a stress on this, because I know my sister's ideas of management differ entirely from mine. I can trust you as I trust myself, Merle, and it is

my wish to secure you from interference of any kind." It was nice to hear this, but her speech made me a little nervous: she evidently dreaded interference for me.

"Is your sister younger than yourself?" I faltered.

"I have two sisters," she returned, quickly; "Gay is much younger; she was not grown up when I married; my eldest sister, Mrs. Markham, was then in India. Two years ago she came back a widow, with her only remaining child, and at my father's request remained with him to manage his household. Domestic matters were not either in his or Gay's line, and Mrs. Markham is one who loves to rule."

I confess this slight sketch of Mrs. Markham did not impress me in her favor. I conceived the idea of a masculine, bustling woman, very different to my beloved mistress. I could not well express these sentiments, but I think Mrs. Morton must have read them in my face.

"I am going to be very frank with you, Merle," she said, after a moment's thought, "and I do not think I shall repent my confidence. I know my sister Adelaide's faults. She has had many troubles with which to contend in her married life, and they have made her a little hard. She lost two dear little girls in India, and as Rolf is her only child, she spoils him dreadfully; in fact, young as he is, he has completely mastered her. He is a very delicate, willful child, and needs firm management; in spite of his faults he is a dear little fellow, and I am very sorry for Rolf."

"Will he be with us in the nursery?" I asked, anxiously.

"No, indeed: Rolf is always with his mother in the drawing-room, to the no small discomfort of his mother's visitors. Sometimes he is with her maid Judson, but that is only when even Mrs. Markham finds him unbearable. A spoiled child is greatly to be pitied, Merle; he has his own way nine times out of ten, and on the tenth he meets

with undesirable severity. Adelaide either will not punish him at all, or punishes him too severely. Children suffer as much from their parents' temper as from over-indulgence."

"I am afraid Rolf's example will be bad for Joyce."

"That is my fear," she replied, with a sigh. "I wish the children could be kept apart, but Rolf will have his own way in that. There is one thing of which I must warn you, Merle. Mrs. Markham may be disposed to interfere in your department; remember, you are responsible to me, and not to her. I look to you to follow my rules and wishes with regard to my children."

"Oh, Mrs. Morton," I burst out, "you are putting me in a very difficult position. If any unpleasantness should arise, I can not refer to you. How am I to help it if Mrs. Markham interferes with the children?"

"You must be firm, Merle; you must act in any difficulty in the way you think will please me. Be true to me, and you may be sure I shall listen to no idle complaints of you. I wish I had not to say all this; it is very painful to hint this of a sister, but Mrs. Markham is not always judicious with regard to children."

"Will it be good for them to go to Netherton under these circumstances?"

"There is nowhere else they can go," she returned, rather sadly; "my husband has such a horror of lodgings, and he will not take a house for us this year—he thinks it an unnecessary expense, as later on we are going to Scotland, that he may have some shooting. All the doctors speak so well of Netherton; the air is very fine and bracing, and my father's garden will be a paradise to the children."

We were interrupted here by Mr. Morton.

"Oh, are you there, Miss Fenton?" he said, pleasantly (he so often called me Miss Fenton now); "I was just wanting you. Violet, your sister has telegraphed as you

wished, and the rooms will be quite ready for the children to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" I gasped.

"Yes," he returned, in his quick, decided voice; "you and Hannah will have plenty of work to-day. You are looking pale, Miss Fenton; sea air will be good for you as well as Joyce. I do not like people to grow pale in my service."

"I have been telling Merle," observed his wife, anxiously, "that she is to have the sole responsibility of our children. Adelaide must not interfere; must she, Alick?"

"Of course not," with a frown. "My dear Violet, we all know what your sister's management means; Rolf is a fine little fellow, but she is utterly ruining him. Remember, Miss Fenton, no unwholesome sweets and delicacies for the children; you know our rules. She may stuff her own boy if she likes, but not my children;" and with this he dismissed me, and sat down beside his wife with some open letters in his hand.

I returned to the nursery with a heavy heart. How little we know as we open our eyes on the new day, what that day's work may bring us! I think one's waking prayer should be, "Lead me in a plain path because of mine enemies!"

I was utterly cast down and disheartened at the thought of leaving my mistress. The responsibility terrified me. I should be at the tender mercies of strangers, who would not recognize my position. Ah! I had got to the Hill Difficulty at last; and yet surely the confidence reposed in me ought to have made me glad. "I trust you as myself." Were not those sweet words to hear from my mistress's lips? Well, I was only a girl. Human nature, and especially girl nature, is subject to hot and cold fits. At one moment we are star-gazing, and the majesty of the universe, with its undeviating laws, seems to lift us out of ourselves with admiration and wonder; and the next hour

we are groveling in the dust, and the grasshopper is a burden, and we see nothing save the hard stones of the highway and the walls that shut us in on every side. "Lead us in a plain path!" Oh, that is just what we want; a Divine Hand to lift us up and clear the dust from our eyes, and to lead us on as little children are led.

These salutary thoughts checked my nervous fears and restored calmness. I remembered a passage that Aunt Agatha had once read to me—a quotation from a favorite book of hers; I had copied it out for myself:

"Do as the little children do—little children, who with one hand hold fast by their father, and with the other gather strawberries or blackberries along the hedges. Do you, while gathering and managing the goods of this world with one hand, with the other always hold fast the hand of your Heavenly Father, turning to Him from time to time, to see if your actions or occupations are pleasing to Him; but take care, above all things, that you never let go His hand, thinking to gather more, for, should He let you go, you will not be able to take another step without falling."

Just then Hannah came to me for the day's orders, and I told her as briefly as possible of the plans for the morrow. To my astonishment, directly I mentioned Netherton, she turned very red, and uttered an exclamation.

"Netherton—we are to go to Netherton—Squire Cheriton's place! Why, miss, it is not more than a mile and a half from there to Dorlcote and Wheeler's Farm."

"Do you mean the farm where your father and your sister Molly live?" I returned, quite taken aback at this, for the girl's eyes were sparkling, and she seemed almost beside herself with joy. "Truly it is an ill wind that blows no one any good."

"Yes, indeed, miss, you have told me a piece of good news. I was just thinking of asking mistress for a week's holiday, only Master Reggie seemed so fretful and Miss

Joyce so weakly, that I hardly knew how I could be spared without putting too much work upon you; but now I shall be near them all for a month or more. Molly had been writing to me the other day to tell me that they were longing for a sight of me."

"I am very glad for your sake, Hannah, that we shall be so near your old home; but now we must see to the children's things, and I must get Rhoda to send a note to the laundress."

I had put a stop to the conversation purposely, for I wanted to know my mistress's opinion before I encouraged Hannah in speaking about her own people. How did I know what Mrs. Morton would wish? I took the opportunity of speaking to her when she came up to the nursery in the course of the evening. Hannah was still packing, and I was collecting some of the children's toys. Mrs. Morton listened to me with great attention; I thought she seemed interested.

"Of course I know Wheeler's Farm," she replied at once; "Michael Sowerby, Hannah's father, is a very respectable man; indeed, they are all most respectable, and I know Mrs. Garnett thinks highly of them. I shall have no objection to my children visiting the farm, if you think proper to take them, Merle; but of course they will go nowhere without you. If you can spare Hannah for a day now and then, I should be glad for her to have the holiday, for she is a good girl, and has always done her duty."

"I will willingly spare her," was my answer, for Hannah's sweet temper and obliging ways had made me her friend. "I was only anxious to know your wishes on this point, in case my conduct or Hannah's should be questioned."

"You are nervous about going to Netherton, Merle," she returned, at once, looking at me more keenly than usual. "You are quite pale this evening. Put down

those toys; Hannah can pack them, with Rhoda's help; I will not have you tire yourself any more to-night."

"I am not tired," I faltered; but the foolish tears rushed to my eyes. Did she have an idea, I wonder, how hard I felt it would be to leave her the next day? As the thought passed through my mind she took the chair beside me.

"The carriage has not come yet; Anderson will let me know when my husband is ready for me; we shall have time for a talk. You are a little down-hearted to-night, Merle; you are dreading leaving us to-morrow."

"I am sorry to leave you," I returned; and now I could not keep the tears back.

"I shall miss you, too," she replied, kindly; "I am getting to know you so well, Merle. I think we understand each other, and then I am so grateful to you for loving my children; no one has ever been so good to them before."

"I am only doing my duty to them and you."

"Perhaps so; but then how few do their duty! How few try to act up to so high a standard! I am dull myself to-night, Merle. No one knows how I feel parting with my children; I try not to indulge in nervous fancies, but I can not feel happy and at rest when they are away from me."

"It is very hard for you," was my answer to this.

"It is not quite so hard this time," she returned, hastily; "I feel they will be safe with you, Merle, that you will watch over them as though they were your own. I know you will justify my trust."

"You may be assured that I will do my best for them."

"I know that," returned my mistress, gently. "You will write to me, will you not, and give me full particulars about my darlings? I think you will like Marshlands; my

sister Gay is very bright and winning, and my father is always kind."

"Mrs. Markham?" I stammered.

"Oh, my sister Adelaide; she will be too much occupied with her own boy and her own affairs to trouble you much. If you are in any difficulty, write to me and I will help you. Now I must say good-night. Have I done you any good, Merle? Have the fears lessened?"

"You always do me good," I answered, gratefully, as she put out her slim hand to me; and, indeed, her few sympathizing words had lifted a little of the weight. When she had left the nursery I sat down and wrote a long letter to Aunt Agatha, bidding her good-bye, and speaking cheerfully of our intended flitting. When the next day came I woke far more cheerful. The bright sunshine, Joyce's excitement, and Hannah's happy looks stimulated me to courage. There was little time for thought, for there was still much to be done before the carriage came round for us. Mrs. Morton accompanied us to the station, and did not quit the platform until our train moved off.

"Remember, Merle, I trust them to you," were her last words before we left her there alone in the summer sunshine.

CHAPTER XI.

MARSHLANDS.

WE had started by an early train, and arrived at Netherton soon after four. I knew we were to be met at the station, and was not at all surprised when a fresh-colored, white-haired old gentleman brandished his stick as a token of welcome to Joyce. I was quite sure that it was Squire Cheriton before Joyce clapped her hands and exclaimed, "There's gran."

"Halloo, little one," he said, cheerily, as she ran up to

him with a joyous face; "so you have not forgotten grandfather? Bless me, you are not a bit like Vi; you have taken after Alick. So this is the boy, nurse? Dear me! which is the nurse?" looking at me with rather a puzzled countenance.

"I am the nurse, sir," I returned, quietly; "and this is Hannah."

"Hannah Sowerby, of course. Bless me, I never forget a face—never; I knew yours directly," as Hannah dropped a countrified courtesy to the squire. "I saw Michael the other day; he was looking hale and hearty—hale and hearty; 'That comes of hard work and temperate living, Michael,' I said—oh, we are both of an age, old Michael and I, and I am hale and hearty, too. So this is my grandson; he is a fine fellow; takes after Vi, I should say. Come along, come along, there's auntie waiting for us;" and, talking half to us and half to himself, Mr. Cheriton led us through the station. On the way, however, we were stopped twice; first, the station-master was interviewed and the children introduced to him.

"My grandchildren, Drake," observed the squire, proudly, twirling his gold-headed stick as he spoke· then a burly farmer jostled against the squire, and the two commenced observations on the weather.

"Fine weather for the crops, Roberts; the oats look lively. These are my grandchildren; fine boy that."

"Little girl looks rather peaky, squire; wants a bit of fattening."

"Eh, what? We'll fatten her, won't we, Joyce?" pinching the child's thin cheek. "Takes after her father, Alick Morton. You can't find fault with my grandson, Roberts, I hope; never seen a finer child in my life."

"Father, father," exclaimed a fresh young voice, "what are you doing with those children? Methuselah is fretting terribly to be off. Do be quick, pray."

"I am coming, Gay. Now, then, all of you, move on.

Ta-ta, Roberts." And Mr. Cheriton drove us out before him. An open barouche was waiting at the door, and a young lady was on the box, trying to hold in a pair of thorough-breds. When she saw us she at once handed the reins to her father, and jumped lightly to the ground.

"Kiss me, you darlings," she said, coaxingly; "don't you know me yet?" as Joyce hung back a little shyly. "I am Gay, the little auntie, as you used to call me. How do you do, Miss Fenton?—you see I know your name. Hannah, I am glad to see you again. There is plenty of room for us all; the boxes are going by omnibus. Now, father, we are all ready;" and in another moment Methuselah and his mate were on their homeward way.

Miss Cheriton chattered all the time. She was a pretty, dark-eyed girl, rather *piquante* in style, but not equal to her beautiful sister, though I caught an expression that reminded me now and then of my mistress. She struck me as very fresh and unconventional, and she had a bright, chirpy voice and manner that must have been very attractive to children. Joyce made friends with her at once, and even Reggie wanted to go to her, and received her caresses and compliments with unusual condescension.

"How wonderfully he has improved, nurse—Miss Fenton, I mean. My sister told me he was a lovely boy, and so he is. Why, Rolf will look quite plain beside him. What nicely behaved children they seem! Poor Rolf is such a plague to us all."

"Don't you love Rolf, auntie?" asked Joyce, fixing her dark eyes on Miss Cheriton's face.

The young aunt looked rather perplexed at this question.

"When Rolf is good I love him, but not when he teases Fidgets, or frightens my canaries; I do not love him a bit then. I am always longing to box his ears, only his mother would be so angry with me. Father dear, do make

Methuselah go a little slower, Mr. Hawtry is trying to overtake us."

"Halloo, Roger!" exclaimed the squire, in his hearty voice, "you did not think to pass Methuselah, did you, on that hack of yours?" And the next moment a gentleman, well mounted on a dark bay mare, rode up, and entered into conversation with Miss Cheriton. He threw a searching glance round the carriage as he lifted his hat, and then laid his hand on the carriage door.

"Good-afternoon, squire; Methuselah seems a trifle fresh. How is it you are not driving as usual, Miss Cheriton? Better employed, I suppose," with a look at Reggie. "So these are Alick Morton's children, are they? The little girl looks delicate. You must bring them out to my place; Mrs. Cornish will give them plenty of new milk. By the bye, isn't that Hannah Sowerby?" And as she blushed and looked pleased, "Why, I was over at Wheeler's Farm this morning, and your sister Molly was talking about you. I wanted Matthew to come up to the Red Farm for a job—he is a handy fellow, that brother of yours—so, as I was waiting, I had a chat with Molly."

I looked across at Hannah, and saw how this kindly mention of her home pleased her. It was good-natured of Mr. Hawtry to single her out, and this little act of Christian charity prepossessed me in his favor. He was not very young—a little over thirty, I should have judged—and had a strong, sensible face, "not a mask without any meaning to it," as Aunt Agatha sometimes said, but a face that seemed to reveal a sensible, downright character.

I saw Mr. Hawtry look in my direction once a little doubtfully. I dare say, being an old friend of the family, he thought it rather odd that Miss Cheriton did not introduce him to me, but Joyce soon enlightened him.

"Oh, nurse! do look at those pretty flowers," she called out, pulling my gown to enforce my attention.

"Yes, I see them, dear," I answered, quietly; and then

Reggie became restless and struggled to get to me, so I took him in my arms, and at that moment the carriage turned in at some lodge gates.

I had not been able to judge much of the place. Miss Cheriton's chatter had engrossed me. I knew we had driven very fast through a pretty village, and that we had turned off down a country road, and that was all. Once I fancied I had caught a blue shimmer in the distance that must have been the sea, but after we had turned into the lodge gates I took no more notice of Miss Cheriton and her companion. I was far too curious to see Marshlands, the home where my beloved mistress had passed her childhood.

A short avenue brought us to the graveled sweep before the hall door. A large sunny garden with terraces seemed to stretch into a park-like meadow; in reality it was divided by a wire fence, to keep in the sheep that were feeding between the trees. An old white pony was looking across the fence, attracted by the sound of our horses, a little black-and-tan terrier flew out on the steps barking, and a peacock, who was spreading his tail on the sun-dial, retreated in much disgust, sweeping his train of feathers behind him.

"Jacko hates Fidgets," observed Miss Cheriton, as the children clapped their hands at the gorgeous bird, and then Mr. Hawtry dismounted and lifted Joyce out of the carriage.

I stood for a moment with Reggie in my arms, admiring the old red-brick house, with its ivy-covered gables, before we entered the wide, dark hall, and it was then that I distinctly heard Mr. Hawtry say:

"Who is that young lady?"

"Do you mean the children's nurse, Miss Fenton?" observed Miss Cheriton, carelessly. "Oh, yes; Vi says she is quite a lady, and very nice, but—" Here I passed on quickly and lost the rest, only my foolish cheeks caught fire. Merle, Merle, be prudent; remember the Valley of

Humiliation. What does it matter, my girl, what the world thinks? Eve was a dairy-maid in Eden.

An old gray-headed butler had hurried out to meet us. Miss Cheriton, who had joined us after a minute or two, questioned him at once.

"Is Mrs. Markham still out, Benson?"

Yes, ma'am, and Master Rolf and Judson are with her but I have taken tea into the morning-room."

"Very well, Benson, I will be down presently. Now, Miss Fenton, let me show you your quarters;" and she preceded us up the dark old staircase, and down a long narrow lobby, lighted with small lozenged-pane windows, and threw open a door at the end of the passage. "This is the old day nursery, and there are two bedrooms communicating with it. Susan will bring up the children's tea directly. Will you ring for anything you want? I am sorry I can not wait now, but I must pour out tea for my father and Mr. Hawtry. I will come up again by and by;" and she nodded pleasantly and ran away.

I looked round the nursery approvingly. It was such a charming, old-fashioned room, rather low, perhaps, but with brown wainscoting, and a dark paneled ceiling, and wooden window-seats, and though the windows were small, they were deliciously quaint, and they looked out on the grass terrace and the sun-dial, and there was the white pony grazing under the elms, and such a pretty peep of the park, as I supposed they called it. An old black-faced sheep came in sight; I called Joyce to look at it, and even Reggie clapped his dear little hands, and cried out, "Ba—ba, ba—ba."

The bedrooms were just as cozy and old-fashioned as the nursery. The bed where Joyce and I were to sleep was hung with curious blue chintz, and there was an oak wardrobe that looked black with age, and curious prints in little black frames hung round the walls. Reggie's cot had chintz hangings too. The afternoon sunshine was flooding

the room, as I stood at the window a moment. I called to Hannah to admire the view. We were at the back of the house; there was a kitchen garden and fruit-trees, then came a deep, narrow lane and corn-field, and beyond lay the sea; I could even catch sight of a white sail very near the shore.

I never saw Hannah so excited as she was when she caught sight of that lane. She thrust her head out of the window, almost overbalancing herself in her eagerness.

"Why, miss," she exclaimed, "there is Cherry Tree Lane, and if we could only see round the corner—but those pear-trees shut it out—we should see Wheeler's Farm. Isn't it like being at home?" her voice trembling with emotion. "Directly I had a taste of the salt air, and a glimpse of Squire Hawtry's corn-fields, I felt almost beside myself." And indeed the girl's honest joy was good to witness, and again, as I thought of those sisters crowding out the attics of Wheeler's Farm, I could have found it in my heart to envy Hannah.

When I had taken off the children's things we went back to the day nursery. A freckle-faced country girl was covering the round table with all sorts of dainties—new-laid eggs, fruit, jam, and honey; there seemed no end to the good things. She nodded to Hannah in a friendly way, and asked after her health in broad Sussex dialect.

"Do you know Susan?" I observed, in some surprise, as I poured out some milk for the thirsty children.

"She is a neighbor's daughter," replied Hannah, as she waited on us. "Susan was never much to my taste, but we learned our samplers together. The Mullinses are not our sort," she continued, with manifest pride. "Joseph Mullins is the village cobbler, but he is none too steady, and father and Molly can't abide him."

As soon as the children had finished their tea, I took them to the window, where they found plenty to amuse them. The white pony was still cropping the grass; here

and there was a nibbling sheep; the rooks were cawing about their nests in the elm-trees; the peacock was strutting along the terrace, accompanied by his mate; a pair of golden-crested pheasants followed them.

Presently the bay mare was brought round by a groom, and Mr. Hawtry came out on the terrace, and stood talking to Mr. Cheriton before he mounted.

"Why did you call him Squire Hawtry, Hannah?" I observed, curiously, as he rode away down the avenue.

"He is mostly called by that name," returned Hannah. "He is a gentleman farmer, and lives at the Red Farm, down Dorlcote way. His mother and sister used to live with him, but his mother died two years ago, and Miss Agnes did not long survive her. She was a sweet creature, and very handsome, but she had been a sad invalid the last few years of her life."

"Poor Mr. Hawtry! and he is all alone?"

"Quite alone, except for his good old housekeeper, Mrs. Cornish; she takes good care of Mr. Roger, as she calls him. Folks say," continued Hannah, somewhat hesitating, 'Squire Hawtry has had enough of loneliness and nursing Miss Agnes, and that he is looking out for a wife; he and Miss Gay are firm friends, and—"

"I think Reggie is getting sleepy," I observed, hastily, for Joyce was listening with all her might, and the old proverb is true in saying "little pitchers have long ears;" besides which, this was gossiping about other people's affairs, and Hannah knew I never countenanced gossip; it always seemed to me such a mean and undignified thing to chatter about those who were inmates of the house that sheltered us. We had partaken of their bread and salt, and so they ought to have been sacred to us. How little oftentimes the world regards the word "honor!" but *Noblesse oblige* is a safe motto.

Hannah took the hint with her usual good-nature, and went off for the bath water. The next moment there was

a slight peremptory tap at the nursery door, and before I could answer a tall, elegant-looking woman, dressed in black, entered the room. I rose at once in some little trepidation; of course it was Mrs. Markham.

"Good-evening, nurse," she said, in rather a thin, highly pitched voice. "I hope you find yourself comfortable, and that the children are not tired with the journey." Then, without waiting for an answer, she seated herself languidly, and called to Joyce, "Come to me, my dear; I am your aunt Adelaide; good children always come when they are called."

I gave Joyce a slight push, for she was hanging back in a most unaccountable way, and yet she was by no means a shy child, and would be friendly even with strangers, if she liked their appearance. I thought Mrs. Markham looked a little annoyed at her hesitation, but she controlled herself, and tried coaxing.

"What would your mamma say, if you refused to kiss poor Aunt Adelaide? Come, that is better," as Joyce advanced timidly. "Why, what a thin, sickly looking child it is!" regarding the sweet little face before her rather critically; "I should hardly have thought," speaking half to herself, "that Violet would have had such a plain child."

I was indignant at this; for every one thought Joyce had a lovely little face, though it was rather too thin and grave. "Excuse me, Mrs. Markham," I observed, hastily, "but Joyce is a very forward child, and understands all that is said before her;" for it was hard that our pet should meet with such a cold reception.

Mrs. Markham regarded me with a supercilious stare; she evidently thought I was taking a liberty with her in venturing to remonstrate, but I took no notice, and prudently restrained myself.

I felt, even at that first moment, an unaccountable dislike to Mrs. Markham. Most people would have pro-

nounced her very handsome, in spite of her sallow complexion and thin lips, but a certain hardness in her expression repelled me, as it repelled Joyce. Her dark eyes regarded one so coldly; there was such hauteur and indifference in her manners; and then the metallic harshness of her voice! "How could she be Mrs. Morton's sister?" I thought, as I recalled the sweet graciousness, the yielding softness, that made my dear mistress so universally beloved.

CHAPTER XII.

GAY CHERITON.

I WAS afraid Mrs. Markham did not understand children. Nothing would induce Reggie to let her kiss him; he beat her off in his usual fashion, with a sulky "Go, go," and hid his face on my shoulder. I could see this vexed her immensely, for she had praised his beauty in most extravagant terms.

Joyce listened with a perplexed expression on her face.

"Have you ever seed an angel, Aunt Adda?" this being her childish abbreviation of Adelaide.

"Dear me, nurse, how badly the child speaks! She is more than six years old, you say? Why, my Rolf is only seven, and speaks beautifully! What did you say, Joyce?" —very sharply—"seen an angel? What unhealthy nonsense to put into a child's head! This comes of new-fangled ideas on your mother's part"—with a glance in my direction. "No, child! of course not. No one has seen an angel."

Joyce looked so shocked at this that I hastened to interpret Mrs. Markham's speech.

"No one sees angels now, Joyce; not as the good people in the Bible used to see them; perhaps we are not good enough. But what put angels into your head, my dear?"

"Only Aunt Adda said Reggie was like an angel, and I

thought she had seed one. What is a cherub, nurse dear? Something good to eat?"

I saw a smile hovering on Mrs. Markham's thin lips. Evidently she found Joyce amusing, but just then a loud peevish voice was distinctly audible in the passage.

"Mother, mother, I say! Go away, Juddy, I tell you. You are a nasty disagreeable old cat—and I will go to mother!"—this accompanied by ominous kicks.

I signed to Hannah to take the children into the adjoining room. It was Reggie's bed-time, and Joyce was tired with her journey. The door was scarcely closed upon them before the same violent kicking was heard against the nursery door.

"It is only Rolf. I am afraid he is very cross," observed Mrs. Markham, placidly, shivering a little, after the fashion of people who lived in India, as she moved away from the open window, and drew a lace scarf round her. "Judson is such a bad manager. She never does contrive to amuse him or keep him quiet."

"He will frighten Reggie," I remonstrated, for she did not offer to stop the noise, and I went quickly to the door.

There was a regular scuffle going on in the passage. A little boy in Highland dress was endeavoring to escape from a young woman, who was holding him back from the door with some difficulty.

"Master Rolf—Master Rolf, what will your mamma say? You will make her head ache, and then you will be sorry."

"I sha'n't be a bit sorry, Juddy, I tell you! I will go in, and—" Here he stopped and stared up in my face. He was a pale, sickly looking child, rather plain, as Miss Cheriton had said, but he had beautiful gray eyes, only they were sparkling with anger. The young woman who held him by the arm had a thin, care-worn face—probably her post was a harassing one, with an exacting mistress and that spoiled boy.

"Who are you?" demanded the boy, rudely.

"I am Miss Fenton, the nurse," I returned. "Your little cousins are just going to bed, and I can not have that noise to disturb them."

"I shall kick again, unless you let me come in and see them."

"For shame, Master Rolf! Whatever makes you so naughty to-night?"

"I mean to be naughty. Hold your stupid old tongue, Juddy! You are a silly woman. That is what mother calls you. I am a gentleman, and shall be naughty if I like. Now then, Mrs. Nurse, may I come in?"

"Not to-night, Master Rolf. To-morrow, if you are good."

"Norse," interrupted Mrs. Markham's voice behind me, "I do not know what right you have to exclude my boy. Let him come in and bid good-night to his cousins. You will behave prettily, Rolf, will you not?"

One look at the surly face before me made me incredulous of any pretty behavior on Rolf's part. I knew Joyce was a nervous child, and easily frightened, and already the loud voices were upsetting Reggie. I could hear him crying, in spite of Hannah's coaxing. I felt I must be firm. The nursery was my private domain. I was determined Rolf should not cross the threshold to-night.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Markham," I returned, quickly, "I can not have the children disturbed at bed-time; it is against Mrs. Morton's rules. Master Rolf may pay us a visit to-morrow, if he be good"—laying a stress on *good*—"but I can not admit him to-night."

She looked at me with haughty incredulity.

"I consider this very impertinent," she muttered, half to herself. But Judson must have heard her.

"Come with me, Rolf darling. Never mind about your cousins. I dare say we shall find something nice down-

stairs;" and she held out her hand to him, but he pushed it away.

"Bring him to the drawing-room, Judson," she said, coolly, not at all discomposed by his rudeness; but I could see my firmness had offended her. She would not soon forgive my excluding Rolf.

Rolf waited till she was out of sight, and then he recommenced his kicks. I exchanged a glance with Judson; her harassed face seemed to appeal to me for help.

"Master Rolf," I said, indignantly, "you call yourself a gentleman, but you are acting like an ill-tempered baby and I shall treat you like one;" and to his intense astonishment I lifted him off the ground, and, being pretty strong, managed to carry him, in spite of his kicks and pinches, down to the hall, followed by Judson. Probably he had never been so summarily dealt with, for his kicks diminished as we descended the stairs; and I left him on the hall mat, looking rather subdued and ashamed of himself.

I had gained my point, but I felt out of heart as I went back to the nursery. I had entered the house prejudiced against Mrs. Markham, and our first interview had ended badly. My conscience justified me in my refusal to admit Rolf; but, all the same, I felt I had made Mrs. Markham my enemy. Her cold eyes had measured me superciliously from the first moment. Very probably she disapproved of my appearance. With women of this caliber—cold, critical, and domineering — poor gentlewomen would have a chance of being sent to the wall.

When the children were asleep I seated myself rather disconsolately by the low nursery window. Hannah had been summoned to the housekeeper's room to see her sister Molly, and had left me alone.

I felt too tired and dispirited to settle to my work or book; besides, it was a shame to shut out the moonlight. The garden seemed transformed into a fairy scene. A

broad silvery path-way stretched across the park; curious shadows lurked under the elms; an indescribable stillness and peace seemed to pervade everything; the flowers and birds were asleep; nothing stirred but a night moth, stretching its dusky wings in the scented air, and in the distance the soft wash of waves against the shore.

I laid my head against the window frame, and let the summer breeze blow over my face, and soon forgot my worries in a long, delicious day-dream. Were my thoughts foolish, I wonder?—mere cobwebs of girls' fancies woven together with moonbeams and rose scents?

"A girl's imagination," as Aunt Agatha once said, "resembles an unbroken colt, that must be disciplined and trained, or it will run away with her." I have a notion that my Pegasus soared pretty high and far that night. I imagined myself an old woman with wrinkles and gray hair, and cap border that seemed to touch my face, and I was sitting alone by a fire reviewing my past life. "It has not been so long, after all," I thought; "with the day's work came the day's strength. The manna pot was never empty, and never overflowed. Who is it said, 'Life is just a patchwork?' I have read it somewhere. I like that idea. 'How badly the children sew in their little bits—a square here and a star there. We work better as we go on.' Yes, that queer comparison is true. The beauty and intricacy of the pattern seem to engross our interest as the years go on. When rest-time comes we fold up our work. Well done or badly done, there will be no time for unpicking false stitches then. Shall I be satisfied with my life's work, I wonder? Will death be to me only the merciful nurse that calls us to rest?"

"Why, Miss Fenton, are you asleep? I have knocked and knocked until I was tired."

I started up in some confusion. Had I fallen asleep, I wonder? for there was Miss Cheriton standing near me, with an oddly shaped Roman lamp in her hand, and there

was a gleam of fun in her eyes, as though she were pleased to catch me napping.

"You must have been tired," she said, smiling. "The room looked quite eerie as I entered it, with streaks of moonlight everywhere. Dinner is just over, and I slipped away to see if you are comfortable. I am afraid you are rather dull."

But I would not allow that, for what business has a nurse to be subject to moods, like idle people? But I could not deny that it was very pleasant to see Miss Cheriton. She was certainly very pretty—a good type of a fresh, healthy, happy English girl, and there is nothing in the world to equal that. The creamy Indian muslin gown suited her perfectly, and so did the knot of crimson roses and maiden-hair against the full white throat; and the small head, with its coil of dark shiny hair, was almost classical in its simplicity. A curious idea came to me as I looked at her. She reminded me of a picture I had seen of one of the ten virgins—ready or unready, I wonder which! The bright-speaking face, the festive garb, the quaint lamp, recalled to me the figure in the foreground, but in a moment the vague image faded away.

"How I wonder what you do with yourself in the evening, when the children are asleep!" observed Gay, glancing at me curiously. Then, as I looked surprised at that, she continued, sitting down beside me in the window-seat, in the most friendly way imaginable:

"Oh, Violet has told me all about you. I am quite interested, I assure you. I know you are not just an ordinary nurse, but have taken up the work from terribly good motives. Now I like that; it interests me dreadfully to see people in earnest, and yet I am never in earnest myself."

"I shall find it difficult to believe that, Miss Cheriton."

"Oh, please don't call me Miss Cheriton; I am Miss Gay to every one. People never think me quite grown-up,

in spite of my nineteen years. Adelaide treats me like a child, and father makes a pet of me. By the bye, you have contrived to offend Adelaide. Now, don't look shocked—I think you were quite right. Rolf is insufferable; but you see no one has mastered him before."

"I was very sorry to contradict Mrs. Markham, but I am obliged to be so careful of Joyce—she is so nervous and excitable; I should not have liked her to see Rolf in that passion."

"Of course you were quite right; I am glad you acted as you did; but you see Rolf is his mother's idol—her 'golden image,' and she expects us all to bow down to him. Rolf can be a nice little fellow when he is not in his tantrums; but he is fearfully mismanaged, and so he is more of a plague than a pleasure to us."

"What a pity!" I observed; but Gay broke into a laugh at my grave face.

"Yes, but it can not be helped, and his mother will have to answer for it. He will be a horribly disagreeable man when he grows up, as I tell Adelaide when I want to make her cross. Don't trouble yourself about Rolf, Miss Fenton; we shall all forgive you if you do box his ears."

"But I should not forgive myself," I returned, smiling; "the blow would do Rolf more harm than good." But she shrugged her shoulders and changed the subject, chattering to me a little while about the house and the garden, and her several pets, treating me just as though she felt I was a girl of her own age.

"It is nice to have some one in the house to whom one can talk," she said at last, very frankly; "Adelaide is so much older, and our tastes do not agree. Now, though you are so dreadfully sensible and matter-of-fact, I like what I have heard of you from Violet, and I mean to come and talk to you very often. I told Adelaide that it was an awfully plucky thing of you to do; for of course we can

see in a moment you have not been used to this sort of thing."

"All dependent positions have their peculiar trials," I replied. "I am beginning to think that in some ways my lot is superior to any governess's. Perhaps I am more isolated, but I gain largely in independence. I live alone, perhaps, but then no one interferes with me."

"Don't be too sure of that when Adelaide is in the house."

"The work is full of interest," I continued, warming to my subject, as Gay's face wore an expression of intelligent curiosity and sympathy. "The children grow, and one's love grows also. It is beautiful to watch the baby natures developing, like seedlings in the early summer; it is not only ministering to their physical wants; a nurse has higher work than that. Forgive me if I am wearying you," breaking off from my subject with manifest effort; "one must not ride a hobby to death, and this is my hobby."

"You are a strange girl," she said, slowly, looking at me with large, puzzled eyes. "I did not know before that girls could be so dreadfully in earnest, but I like to listen to you. I am afraid my life will shock you, Miss Fenton; not that I do any harm—oh, no harm at all—only I am always amusing myself. Life is such a delicious thing, you see, and we can not be young forever."

"Surely it is not wrong to amuse yourself."

"Not wrong, perhaps," with a little laugh; "but I lead a butterfly existence, and yet I am always busy, too. How is one to find time for reading and improving one's self or working for the poor, when there are all my pets to feed, and the flower-vases to fill, and the bees and the garden? and in the afternoon I ride with father; and there is tennis, or archery, or boating; and in the evening if I did not sing to him—well, he would be so dull, for Adelaide always reads to herself, and if I do not sing I talk to him, or play

at chess; and then there is no time for anything; and so the days go on."

"Miss Gay, I do not consider you are leading a perfectly useless life," I observed, when she had finished.

"Not useless; but look at Violet's life beside mine."

"In my opinion your sister works too much; she is using up health and energy most recklessly. Perhaps you might do more with your time, but it can not be a useless life if you are your father's companion. By your own account you ride with him, sing to him, and talk to him. This may be your work as much as being a nurse is mine."

"You are very merciful in your judgment," she said, with a crisp laugh, as she rose from the window-seat. "What a strange conversation we have had! What would Adelaide have thought of it? She is always scolding me for being irresponsible and wasting time, and even father calls me his 'humming-bird.' You have comforted me a little, though I must confess my conscience indorses their opinion. Good-night, Miss Fenton. Violet calls you Merle, does she not? and it is such a pretty name. The other sounds dreadfully stiff." And she took up her lamp and left the room, humming a Scotch ballad as she went, leaving me to take up my neglected work, and ponder over our conversation.

"Were they right in condemning her as a frivolous idler?" I wondered; but I knew too little of Gay Cheriton to answer that question. Only in creation one sees beautiful butterflies and humming-birds as well as working bees. All are not called upon to labor. A happy few live in the sunshine, like gauzy-winged insects in the ambient air. Surely to cultivate cheerfulness; to be happy with innocent happiness; to love and minister to those we love, may be work of another grade. We must be careful not to point out our own narrow groove as the general foot-way. The All-Father has diversity of work for us to do, and all is not of the same pattern.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LITTLE WORKERS IN BROWN.

How delicious it is when one is young to wake up in a fresh place on a summer's morning! It was my belief that the birds woke me, there was such a twittering under the eaves, where the house-martins had built their nests, such a warbling of thrushes breakfasting on the dewy lawn, such a cawing of rooks under the elm-trees; such a joyous bird-symphony altogether, while I lay in my old-fashioned blue bed, looking round the quaint old room and trying to decipher the meaning of the curious prints in their black frames. When I was tired of this I rose and went to the window. The kitchen-garden, with its row of bee-hives, was just under the window, and beyond were Cherry Tree Lane and Squire Hawtry's corn-field, and then a vague blue line, and a brown sail shimmering in the sunlight. The sweet peacefulness of the scene seemed to sink into my heart, and I could have sung my "Te Deum" with the birds.

When the children were dressed and we had finished our early breakfast, I went to the window with Reggie while Hannah was clearing the table. Joyce had already climbed up on the window-seat; she was wild to go into the garden and see auntie's pets, and I thought it would be no harm to humor her fancy and defer our walk to the shore.

As we stood there Miss Cheriton came out on the terrace. She wore a broad-brimmed hat and long gardening gloves, and carried a basket. She gave a low, peculiar call, and in a moment there was a fluttering of wings in the air, and a crowd of pigeons came round her feet to pick up the grain she had scattered; the pheasants and peacocks joined them.

I thought what a pretty picture it would have made;

the old red-brick house with its ivy-covered gables in the background; the terrace with its sun-dial and antique vases; the girl in her white gown with her beautiful pets round her, her favorite blue pigeons eating out of her hand.

"Oh, auntie, may we come?" pleaded Joyce; and Miss Cheriton looked up at us and smiled and nodded, and Joyce snatched her sun-bonnet, and in a few minutes we had joined her on the terrace.

She greeted us with evident pleasure, and playfully held up her finger to silence Joyce.

"Don't make a noise, my pet, or Rolf will hear you and want to come out; he is having his breakfast with Aunt Adelaide; and he is so rough and tiresome that I do not care to have him with me just now; you shall go with me into the poultry-yard and feed the little yellow chicks yourself."

Joyce was highly delighted at this prospect, and trotted along in her big white sun-bonnet, chattering as fast as her tongue would go. When we arrived at the poultry-yard, Miss Cheriton filled her pinafore with grain and showed her where to throw it, and then picked up one of the downy yellow chicks for Reggie to kiss and hug; but he was so unwilling to part with it that we had some trouble to rescue the warm struggling thing; only the speckled hen was in such a fuss, clacking loudly in the midst of her brood. When we had exhausted the grain and had fed some gray rabbits, and had peeped in at the stables, and had bestowed a passing attention on the big St. Bernard in his kennel—Miss Cheriton's chief favorite, next to her brown mare, Bonnie—we sat down on a bench in the orchard, at some little distance from the bee-hives, while the children gathered daisies and buttercups.

"I am so fond of this old orchard," observed Miss Cheriton, as she threw down her empty basket and removed her gloves, showing a pair of small brown hands that

looked very strong and capable; "when I have nothing else to do, I and my pets come here and enjoy the quiet. Do you know, the peacocks and pheasants will follow me all over the place as closely as a dog? They don't mind Lion a bit; and he is as gentle as a lamb. On Sunday afternoon I have all the creatures round me. Adelaide declares I waste my time dreadfully with the beasties."

"They must give you plenty of occupation, Miss Cheriton;" for I had come to the conclusion that this girl was far from idle. The care of that extensive poultry-yard could be no sinecure's office, besides which the bee-hives were her exclusive charge, though I heard afterward the gardener's son, Jim, was her under-helper. All the live things about the place looked to her for food and comfort. She had a cage full of canaries in the conservatory, and a large gray parrot as well.

"Oh, I am always with my pets and flowers until luncheon-time," she remarked, carelessly. "Jim is a very handy boy, and helps me with the rough work. I was up at six this morning, and we had moved half the pots in the conservatory before breakfast. I am always up early, except in the winter; the world is not half awake at that time of the year, and certainly not well lighted."

"Those bee-hives must be a very profitable investment," I observed, for I had heard before now that people had added largely to their incomes by keeping bees.

"You would be surprised how much I make by my hives," she returned. "I have only a limited interest in the poultry-yard, and have to find chickens and eggs for the household, but the bee-hives are my own. I succeeded so well with them last year, and I believe I shall do just as well this autumn. I am very proud of my bees."

"It would not be a bad plan—" I began, and then I stopped, for I had spoken hastily, and how could I know if my words would be well received?

"Well," she said, with a pretty air of impatience, "why

do you stop? You have got something dreadfully sensible in your head, and I should like to hear it."

"I am rather too quick with my words," I answered, somewhat hesitating. "I was only thinking of what you said last night; you were condemning yourself very needlessly, as I think, and comparing your means of usefulness with Mrs. Morton's."

"With Violet's many-sided duties. Well, I do not retract my words. I said I was always amusing myself; so I am; my bees are my playthings."

"You could make them work for you if you chose," I returned, quickly; "if one of these hives, for example, were devoted to some good purpose, if the money you got for the honey were given to one of those institutions in which your sister takes such interest."

"Oh, what a nice idea!" she exclaimed, with a bright look. "I wonder what put that into your head? I was rather uncomfortable having all that money to spend on myself; I thought of giving some to Adelaide for Rolf, only I can not get up an interest in that boy. I have more than I want, for one does not need so many dresses in the country, and nothing will induce me to go through a London season again. I tried it once," with a merry laugh, "just to please Violet, but it nearly killed me, so I wrote to father to take me away. I should have liked the balls very well, only I got so dreadfully sleepy before they were over, and the rides in the Row were nice, if only they would have let me gallop, but I was nearly taken up for furious riding once when I could not get Bonnie to stop, and after that Alick lectured me, and I got sick of it."

"You would not like your sister's life, then?"

Gay shrugged her shoulders with a gesture of disgust.

"It is not life at all; it is a daily round of harassing duties. Look what it has done for Violet—robbed her of spirits and bloom; she will be an old woman before her time. The fun is very well, but there is too much of it.

I pined for fresh air, for the garden, and the bees, and my other pets. I am afraid my partners thought me dreadfully rustic; I seemed to amuse them. I do not care for the young men in ball-rooms, they are so vapid, and, for all their politeness, they seemed to be laughing at one."

I could not help smiling at this. It was very odd she should be so frank with me. She must have forgotten that I had no experience of ball-rooms, and had never danced except at school-parties, when the girls were allowed to bring their brothers.

"You are looking satirical, Miss Fenton. Oh, of course, I see what you mean; but never mind, there are better things than balls in life. For my part, I prefer a solitary gallop on Bonnie to Strauss's best waltz, though I do love dancing too; but, you see, neither Violet nor I have been trained to a fashionable life. We have lived in the country, have risen early, and been in the open air from morning to night, and now poor Violet never goes to bed in time to get a beauty sleep, and she drives instead of taking a good walk, so no wonder her cheeks get pale and thin."

"It is a grievous pity," I began; but Gay interrupted me.

"Oh, it is no use talking about Violet, I have given her up long ago; Alick has robbed me of her entirely. Now about your benevolent project; I mean to carry it out. Do you know the Children's Incurable Hospital, Maida Vale? Violet is always working for that. There is to be a 'Muriel Cot,' in memory of the dear little baby she lost. Now why should I not have a 'Children's Hive,' and make those special bees gather honey for those little incurable children? I call that a lovely idea. Look, that end hive under the apple-tree shall be the one. Miss Fenton, you have emancipated me; I feel a philanthropist already; the world will be the better for me and my workers."

I looked at her admiringly: such a lovely color had come

to her face, and her eyes looked so bright and happy. I felt I understood Gay Cheriton from that moment. She was one of those guileless, innocent natures that are long in throwing off childhood. She was full of generous impulses, frank and outspoken to a fault; the yoke of life pressed lightly on her; she was like an unbridled colt, that had never felt the curb or the spur; gentle guidance, a word from those she loved, was sufficient to restrain her. I knew now why Joyce had called her the little auntie; there was an air of extreme youth about her; she was so very lovable that diminutiveness suited her, and I thought her father's pet name of humming-bird suited her exactly; she was so quick and bright and restless, her vitality and energy demanded constant movement.

"How I am chattering!" she said at last, "and I have all the vases to fill before luncheon, but, as I told you last night, I am fond of talking if I can get any one to listen to me. Adelaide never will listen to me patiently; she says I am such a chatter-box. Good-bye for the present, Miss Fenton." And she tripped away, singing in such a fresh young voice as she went down the orchard that I did not wonder when a little brown linnet perched on a rose-bush answered her. I think the birds must have loved to hear her.

I sat for some time contemplating the low white gate and the row of bee-hives. I was rather pleased with the idea I had started; a word in season sometimes brings a rich harvest. I thought some time of the tiny workers in their brown livery bringing in their rich stores for the afflicted children; and it seemed to me that the offering would be a sweet savor to the Master who loved children.

I fell into a reverie over it; I thought how much might be done for others with little cost if people would only think; it is want of thought that clogs usefulness. Great sacrifices are so seldom demanded from us; we are not now called upon to forsake all that we hold dear and fol-

low the Christ—little daily duties, small hourly renunciations, pleasures given up for some cheerful loving service; these are the free-will offerings that all may yield; only the people must give "willingly."

The morning passed pleasantly in the sunny orchard; when the children tired of their play we went back to the house, that they might have their noonday sleep. I was sitting alone in the nursery, mending Reggie's pinafore, when I heard the clatter of noisy footsteps in the corridor, and a moment after the nursery latch was lifted without ceremony, and Rolf peeped in. He had droll, half-ashamed expression on his face, but it bore no trace of yesterday's ill-humor.

"May I come in, if you please, Mrs. New Nurse?"

"My name is Miss Fenton, as I told you yesterday; or you may call me nurse if you choose. Yes; you may come in and talk to me if you like, Master Rolf; but you must be very quiet, as your little cousins are asleep."

"What precious babies they must be to sleep in the day!" he observed, disdainfully, as he planted himself without ceremony on the window-seat. "I sit up until ten o'clock every night; sometimes I will not go to bed until mother goes."

> "'Early to bed and early to rise,
> Makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise,'

Master Rolf."

"Wealthy means rich, doesn't it? Well, Juddy said I shall be a rich man some day. I have got father's watch and sword now, only mother locks them up until I am bigger. You are not rich, eh, Miss Fenton?" peeping into my face rather maliciously.

"No, Master Rolf," I returned, quietly.

"Oh, I knew that you are only a nurse; I heard mother and Aunt Gay talking about you last night. Mother said you were a poor sort, and she wondered at Violet's in-

fatuation. She thought you stuck up and disagreeable, and not much to look at; a plain young woman, and very disrespectful. There, now!"

"Master Rolf," I observed, calmly, and suppressing my inward wrath, "you call yourself a gentleman, but I assure you a savage shows more gentlemanly feeling than you. Don't you know your mother's words should be sacred, and you are bound in honor not to repeat them?" And then, as he seemed rather impressed at this, I told him how, even among savages and wild and uncultured nations, the sense of hospitality and gratitude was so strong that, when a man had partaken of bread and salt, broken the bread of fellowship, he was bound in honor not to betray or injure his host in any way; and I related to him an anecdote of an Armenian servant, who had long been faithful to his master, and had defended him in many dangers in his travels through a lawless country.

"The master," I continued, "had vast treasures under his care, and he was greatly troubled when his servant said he must leave him. Judge what his feelings must have been when the man coolly told him that he had entered into a league with some banditti to rob him of his money; that it would be mean to remain in his service under these circumstances, and that he had given him warning of his intention, that he might defend himself, and that now they were equal.

"Even this lawless robber had some notions of honor, Master Rolf; while he eat his master's bread and salt he was bound by his service not to injure him. Now you are only a little boy, but you ought to understand that you also are bound not to betray your mother or repeat her words, as long as you eat her bread and salt; that is the way people do so much mischief in the world, repeating things they know are not meant to be heard."

Rolf's eyes sparkled.

"I like that story awfully. Yes," and looking at me

critically, "I like you too, though you are a plain young woman. No, I did not mean to say that," interrupting himself in a hurry; "bread and salt, you know; I shall always think of that when I am going to tell Juddy things that mother says. She is an old stupid, you know, and she never has time to make a tail to my kite, and mother says she has no patience with her, she is such an—oh, oh, Miss Fenton, bread and salt! How ever shall I remember when I want to put Juddy in a rage?"

"I dare say I shall be able to help you with your kite," I returned, changing the subject, "but we shall want plenty of string and paper."

"Oh, you nice old thing!" replied Rolf, ecstatically. "You are not a bit plain, not a bit; I shall tell mother I think you lovely, and that I mean to marry you when I grow up. Won't she stare at that? May I bring my kite here this afternoon?"

"No, no, my dear, not this afternoon; we are going to the shore."

"Oh, then I will come with you. Mother," as Mrs. Markham appeared at the door, and looked at us with unfeigned surprise, "I can't drive with you this afternoon; I am going on the beach with Miss Fenton and the children."

CHAPTER XIV.

"BREAD AND SALT."

I THOUGHT Mrs. Markham looked somewhat displeased.

"We must ask your mother's permission, Master Rolf;" then, turning to her, "I hope you will allow him to go with us this afternoon;" for, in spite of his rude ways, I felt full of pity for the lonely little boy; he seemed to have no playfellows except poor Judson, who was a low-spirited, overworked young woman. It must have been dreary for him to be in a household of grown-up people,

who all voted him a plague and took no trouble to amuse him. Spoiled children are seldom happy ones; and it did not need a second look at Rolf's pale, sickly face to read the lines of discontent and peevishness.

"I am rather surprised that Miss Fenton should make such a request after her treatment of my boy yesterday," returned Mrs. Markham, ungraciously. I think if she had dared to contradict Rolf she would not have given her consent, but a sulky look was already clouding his face.

"Never mind about that," he said, impatiently; "Miss Fenton is going to make the tail for my kite; and I am going out with her this afternoon, and I shall and will go."

"Master Rolf, that is not the way to answer your mother."

"You may leave me to rebuke my own child," she observed, coldly. "Very well, Rolf; you may go, but you need not be so cross about it. I came to see about the children, Miss Fenton; I think it is too hot for them to go on the beach this afternoon."

"Joyce will wear her sun-bonnet; and there is a nice breeze," I returned, somewhat ruffled by this interference. I fancy she did it to aggravate me, for there was no fault to be found with the weather, and I knew my mistress always left these things to me.

She remained for a few minutes making little suggestions about the ventilation and the nursery arrangements, which I bore as patiently as I could, though the harsh, metallic voice irritated me dreadfully. I did not wish to be disrespectful to Mrs. Markham, but I did not feel bound to obey her orders, and I knew I should tell her so if any grave dispute arose between us. I was rather relieved when she left the room at last, taking Rolf with her; but in a few minutes afterward Judson glided in on tiptoe.

"Oh, Miss Fenton," she said, in a pathetic voice, "I am so grateful to you for promising to take charge of Mas

ter Rolf this afternoon; I thought there would be such a piece of work; Master Rolf thought he was going out in the carriage, and Mrs. Markham has friends, and can not find room for him; and what I should have done with him all the aftrenoon, I hardly know."

"If Rolf is good I have no objection to take charge of him; I am very fond of children, only they must be obedient."

"Obedience is an unknown word to Master Rolf," returned Judson, lugubriously; "times out of number that boy has got me into trouble, just because he would not mind a word I said. Why, he got the colonel's sword out of his mother's wardrobe one day, and nearly killed himself, and another morning he fired off his grandfather's gun, that had been loaded by mistake, and shot poor old Pincher—not that he meant to do it; he was aiming at one of the pheasants."

This was not pleasant to hear, and I inwardly resolved not to trust the children out of my sight; for who could tell what unforeseen accident might arise from Rolf's recklessness?

"Mrs. Markham blames me for all that happens," went on Judson, "and Master Rolf knows that, and there is no checking him; he is not merely so mischievous when his mother is near, because she loses patience, and has more than once boxed his ears soundly. She spoils him dreadfully, and he takes liberties with her as no child ought to take with a parent; but now and then, when he has aggravated her past bearing, I have known her punish him pretty sharply."

This was sad; injudicious indulgence, and injudicious severity. Who could wonder if the results were unsatisfactory?

"No one dares to say a word to him except his mother," went on Judson; "it is just her temper when she flies out at him; but she worships the very ground he walks on.

If his finger aches she thinks he is going to die, and the house is in an uproar; and yet when he is ill he is as contrary as possible, and will not take a thing from her, for all her petting and coaxing."

It seemed a relief to Judson to pour out her woes, and I could hardly refuse to listen to her. She was evidently attached to her mistress, with whom she had lived since her marriage; but she was one of those helpless beings who are made the butt of other people's wills and passions; she had no dignity of mind to repel even childish impertinence; her nervous, vacillating ways would only increase Rolf's tyrannical nature.

I could understand how a high-spirited boy would resist any command enforced by that plaintive voice. A few quick concise words would influence him more than a torrent of feeble reproaches from Judson. He was not without generous impulses — what English boy is? — he had grasped at once my meaning when I rebuked him for his want of gentlemanly honor, but he was too precocious and overbearing, and had lived too much in the society of grown-up people.

My knowledge of the world was not great, but I know how deficient in reticence many grown-up people are in the presence of children; the stream of talk that is poured into the little pitchers is often defiled with low conventional views of duty and painfully uncharitable remarks; the pure mirror of a child's mind—and how pure that mind often is!—is frequently sullied by some unchristian observations from lips that to the child are half divine. "See how ye offend one of these little ones," was the Master's warning; and yet if we could look into one of these young minds, we should often see its placid serenity broken up and ruffled by some unthinking speech, flung like a pitiless pebble into its brightness.

After all, we spent a pleasant afternoon on the beach,

and I do not believe the children enjoyed themselves more than Hannah and I.

It was not a long walk to the shore if we had followed the direct route; but I wanted to see the pretty village of Netherton more closely; so we walked past the church and down the main street, and turned off by the row of bungalows that skirted the cliff, and, crossing the corn-fields, made our way down a narrow cutting to a little strip of shingly beach, with its border of yellow sands washed by the summer surf. I would willingly have sat under the break-water all the afternoon, watching the baby waves lapping upon the sands, and laying driblets of brown and green seaweed on the shore, while Reggie brought me wet pebbles and little dried-up crabs and empty mussel shells, but Rolf wanted me to help with his sand castle; indeed, we were all pressed into the service; even Reggie dug up tiny dabs of sand and flung them at us, under the belief that he was helping too.

What a pretty scene it was, when the castle was finished, and its ramparts adorned with long green festoons and pennants of brown ribbon seaweed; and Reggie sat at the top kicking his little bare legs with delight, while Rolf dug the trench down to the sea, which filled and bubbled over in a miniature lake, in which disported the luckless crabs and jelly fish which he had collected for his aquarium.

There is something sad in the transitoriness of children's play on the shore; they are so eager to build up their sand towers and mounds. When the feeble structure is finished the little work-people give a cry of joy, as though some great task were accomplished. Then the waves creep up stealthily; there is a little cold lisping outside the outworks, as though the treacherous foes were lurking around; in a few seconds the toy castle is in ruins. The children look at the gray pool that has ingulfed their treasure with wide, disappointed eyes.

"Oh, the greedy sea," they say, "it has destroyed our

castle!" But to-morrow they will come again with beautiful childish faith and build another, and still another, until some new game is proposed, or they are weary of play.

It was quite late in the afternoon when we turned our faces homeward. Joyce was tired, so we put her in the perambulator, and I carried Reggie. Rolf hung behind rather sulkily; fatigue evidently made him cross; but he brightened up in an instant when the sound of horses' hoofs struck on our ears, and in another moment a little cavalcade came in sight—Miss Cheriton mounted on her pretty brown mare Brownie, and her father and Mr. Hawtry on either side of her.

She smiled and waved her hand to us, and Mr. Hawtry raised his hat slightly. They would have passed on, but Rolf exclaimed, "Oh, do take me up for a ride, Mr. Hawtry, I am so tired!" and Mr. Hawtry looked at Miss Cheriton, and pulled up at once.

"Put your foot on my boot, then, and I can reach you," he returned; and as Hannah lifted him up, not without difficulty, he threw his arm round him, and kept him steady. "Now, then, hold tight; we must overtake the others," I heard him say, and they were soon out of sight.

"It must be werry nice to be Rolf," sighed Joyce, enviously, as Hannah wheeled her up the dusty road.

I think we were all glad when we had reached the cool nursery, and found a plentiful tea spread on the round table. The children were so sleepy that we were obliged to put them to bed as soon as they had finished their tea.

Rolf did not make his appearance until later, and then he burst into the room with his arm full of paper and string, and we were very soon hard at work on the window-seat, constructing the tail for his kite.

He was in high spirits, and talked volubly all the time.

"I told mother about bre[illegible] and salt," he began, "and

she liked the idea very much. She made me repeat it again to grandpapa, and he patted me on the head, and gave me half a crown. When grandpapa is pleased about anything he always gives people half a crown. I think he ought to give you one, Fenny. Do you mind my calling you Fenny? it sounds so nice, rather like funny, and you are so funny sometimes."

"It sounds much more like Fanny," I returned.

"Oh, do you think so? I will ask Aunt Gay what she thinks. Aunt Gay is so fond of you; she told me so to-day, only she said it was a secret, so you must keep it. I told Mr. Hawtry the story about the robber servant this evening after dinner, and he said that he was a plucky fellow, in spite of his being a robber; and so I think. Do you like Mr. Hawtry, Fenny?"

"I do not know him, dear."

"Oh, no, of course, you are only a nurse, and so you don't come in the drawing-room like other people; you would not know how to behave, would you? Mr. Hawtry said something about you this evening. Mother was talking to him, you know how, only I can't tell you—bread and salt, you know;" and here Rolf looked excessively solemn; "and Mr. Hawtry said—no, don't stop me, it is nothing bad, nothing like mother; oh, dear, it will come out, I know—he only said, 'She seems a very quiet, well-conducted young person, and not at all above her duties;' for you were carrying Reggie, you know."

"Oh, Rolf, do hold your tongue!" I exclaimed, crossly; for this was too much for my forbearance. What business had Mrs. Markham to talk me over with strangers. I ought to have stopped Rolf, but my curiosity was too strong at that moment. "A quiet, well-conducted young person," indeed! I felt in a fever of indignation.

Rolf looked from his kite with some surprise.

"Does talking disturb you? We are getting on beautifully. What a lovely tail my kite will have!" Then, as

though a thought struck him, "Are you ever cross, Fenny; really cross, I mean?"

"Yes, very often, Rolf," for being a fairly conscientious person, I could not deny my faults of temper.

"Oh!" with a peculiar intonation, "I wonder if Aunt Gay knows that. Do you remember any anecdotes about crossness, Fenny?"

I am afraid of what my answer might have been, for I was considerably nettled at Rolf's malicious tone, but happily Judson came at that moment with a message from Mrs. Markham that even Rolf did not dare to disobey, for he ran off at once, without bidding me good-night, and leaving all his tackle strewn over the floor for Judson to clear.

As soon as I was left in solitude, I went to the open window. It was clear moonlight again. There were the tree-shadows, and the long, silvery path across the meadows; a warm radiance from the drawing-room was flung across the terrace. The same sweet bird-like voice that I had heard in the orchard that morning was singing an old-fashioned ballad—

"My mother bids me bind my hair."

Some one clapped their hands and said "Bravo!" when it was finished.

"What a lovely evening! Do come into the garden, Adelaide; it is quite warm and balmy." And then there was a rustle and movement underneath me, a sweep of dark drapery, followed by the whisk of a white gown, as Gay ran down the steps pursued by Rolf. Two gentlemen sauntered down the terrace; one of them was Mr. Hawtry; I could hear his voicie quite plainly.

"This is a capital cigarette, squire. When a man is not much of a smoker, he will not put up with an inferior article. I have some cigars by me now—" The remainder of the interesting sentence was lost in the distance.

Men are rather satirical on the subject of women's talk. They quiz us dreadfully, and insist that our main topic is bonnets; but I am not sure that we could not retaliate with equal force. Bonnets can be treated as works of art, but could anything be more trivial and worthless than a cigar?

They were still talking about the odious things when they returned, only I was too disgusted to listen any more. I was in a bad humor, that was certain—one of those moods when only a real tough piece of work can relieve one. I closed the window and drew down the blind, and then armed myself with my pocket dictionary. I would write a long letter to my mistress, and tell her about our afternoon on the beach, and I would pick out the hardest and most difficult words—those that I generally eschewed.

I heard afterward I had written a beautiful letter, without a single mistake, and that my mistress read it over and over again—that is, that she considered it beautiful, because it was all about the children.

"Nonsense, Merle, it was a sweet letter, and I showed it to my husband."

I was in a better humor when I had finished it, and called Hannah.

"Hannah, we shall go on the beach to-morrow morning, and so I shall be able to spare you in the afternoon; I shall not take the children further than the garden. You can go and have tea with your sister, if you like, and you need not hurry home. I am growing far too idle, and I have not half enough to do;" for I wanted to check any expression of gratitude on the girl's part; but a tap at the door silenced us both.

It was only Miss Cheriton come to wish me good-night. She had a basket of fruit and a dainty little bunch of roses in her hand.

"I saw the light in your window, and thought of the poor prisoner behind it, and I thought this would cheer

you up," laying her pretty offering on the table. "I am going to take you all for a drive to-morrow through Orton-on-Sea; the children will like to see the shops and jetty. Well, good-night; I am dreadfully sleepy; to-morrow we will have another long talk. And then she left me alone with the roses.

CHAPTER XV.

ANOTHER VISITOR AT MARSHLANDS.

THE following two or three weeks passed rapidly and pleasantly; but for two serious drawbacks that hindered my thorough enjoyment, I should have owned myself perfectly happy, but Mrs. Markham and Rolf were perpetual thorns in my side.

A consciousness of being disliked by any human being, however uncongenial to us, is always a disagreeable discovery. The cause of the repellent action of one mind on another may be an interesting psychological study, but in practice it brings us to a sadder and lower level. I knew Mrs. Markham honestly disliked me; but the cause of such marked disfavor utterly baffled me.

Most people found her fascinating; she was intellectual and refined, and had many good qualities, but she was not essentially womanly. Troubles and the loss of her children had hardened her; imbittered by disappointment—for her married life, short as it was, had been singularly unhappy—she had come back to her father's house a cold, resentful woman, who masked unhappiness under an air of languid indifference, and whose strong will and concealed love of power governed the whole household. "Adelaide manages us all," Miss Cheriton would say, laughing; and I used to wonder if she ever rebelled against her sister's dictates. I knew the squire was like wax in the hands of his eldest daughter; he was one of those indolent, peace-loving men who are governed by their womankind; his wife had

ruled him, and now his widowed daughter held the reins. I think Gay was like her father; she went on her own way and shut her eyes to anything disagreeable. It would never have done for me to quarrel openly with Mrs. Markham; common sense and respect for my mistress's sister kept me silent under great provocation. I controlled my words, and in some measure I controlled voice and outward manner, but my inward antagonism must have revealed itself now and then by an unguarded tone.

My chief difficulty was to prevent her spoiling Joyce. After the first, she had become very fond of the child, and was always sending for her to the drawing-room, and loading her with toys and sweetmeats. Mr. Morton's orders had been very stringent about sweetmeats, and again and again I was obliged to confiscate poor Joyce's goodies, as she called them. I had extracted from her a promise that she should eat nothing out of the nursery, and nothing could induce the child to disobey me.

"Nurse says I mustn't, Aunt Adda," was her constant remark; and Mrs. Markham chose to consider herself aggrieved at this childish obstinacy. She spoke to me once about it with marked displeasure.

"I have had children of my own, and I suppose I know what is good for them," she said, with a touch of scorn in her voice; "you have no right to enforce such ridiculous rules on Joyce."

"I have Mrs. Morton's orders," I replied, curtly, "Doctor Myrtle told me to be very careful of Joyce's diet, I can not allow her to eat things I know will hurt her;" and I continued to confiscate the goodies.

But though I was firm in all that concerned the children's health, there were many occasions on which I was obliged to submit to Mrs. Markham's interference. Very often my plans for the day were frustrated for no legitimate cause. I was disposed to think sometimes that she acted in this way just to vex me and make me lose my

temper. If we were starting for the beach, Judson would bring us a message that her mistress would prefer my taking the children into the orchard; and sometimes on a hot afternoon, when we were comfortably ensconced on the bench under the apple-trees, Judson would inform us that Mrs. Markham thought we had better go down to the sea. Sometimes I yielded to these demands, if I thought the children would not suffer by them, but at other times I would tell Judson that the sun was too hot or the children too tired, and that we had better remain as we were. If this was the case, Mrs. Markham would sometimes come out herself and argue the matter, but I always stood my ground boldly, though I was perfectly aware that the afternoon's post would convey a letter to Prince's Gate complaining of my impertinence in disputing her orders.

My mistress's letters were my chief comfort, and they generally came on the morning after one of these disputes. She would write to me so affectionately, and tell me how she missed me as well as the children, and though she never alluded openly to what had occurred, there was always a little sentence of half-veiled meaning that set my mind at rest.

"My sister Gay tells me that the children are getting so brown and strong with the sea air," she wrote once, "and that dear little Joyce has quite a nice color. Thank you so much for your ceaseless care of them; you know I trust you implicitly, Merle, and I have no fear that you will disappoint me; your good sense will carry you safely through any little difficulty that may arise. Write to me as often as you can; your letters are so nice. I am very busy and very tired, for this ball has entailed so much work and fuss, but your letters seem to rest me."

Rolf was also a serious impediment to my enjoyment. Ever since I had helped him with his kite, he had attached himself to me, and insisted on joining us in all our walks, and in spending the greater part of his day with us. I

was tolerably certain in my own mind that this childish infatuation excited Mrs. Markham's jealousy. Until we had arrived she had been Rolf's sole companion; he had accompanied her in her drives, harassed her from morning to night with his ceaseless demands for amusements, and had been the secretly dreaded torment of all the visitors to Marshlands, except Mr. Hawtry, who was rather good to him.

His precocity, his love of practical jokes, and his rough impertinence, made him at feud with the whole household; the servants disliked him, and were always bringing complaints of Master Rolf. I believe Judson was fond of him in a way, but then she had had charge of him from a baby.

When Rolf began to desert the drawing-room for the nursery, Mrs. Markham used all her efforts to coax him back to her side, but she might as well have spoken to the wind. Rolf played with Joyce on the beach; he raced her up and down the little hillocks in the orchard, or hunted with her for wild flowers in the lanes that surrounded Marshlands. When the children were asleep, he invaded my quiet with requests to mend his broken toys or join him in some game. I grew quite expert in rigging his new boat, and dressed toy soldiers and sailors by the dozen. Sometimes I was inclined to rebel at such waste of time, but I remembered that Rolf had no playfellows; it was better for him to be playing spillikins or go-bang with me in the nursery than lounging listlessly about the drawing-room, listening to grown-up people's talk; a child's natural life was better for his health. Miss Cheriton told me more than once that people who came to the house thought Rolf so much improved. Certainly he was not so pale and fretful after a long morning spent on the beach in wading knee-deep to sail his boat or digging sand wells which Joyce filled out of her bucket. When he grew too rough or boisterous I al[illegible] Joyce away, and with Hau-

nah and myself to look after them no harm could come to the children.

I grew rather fond of Rolf after a time, and his company would not have been irksome to me, but for his tiresome habit of repeating the speeches he had heard in the drawing-room. He always checked himself when he remembered, or when I held up my finger, but the half sentence would linger in my memory.

But this was not the worst. I soon found out that anything I told him found its way into the drawing-room; in fact, Rolf was an inveterate chatter-box. With all his good intentions, he could not hold his tongue, and mischief was often the result.

It was my habit to teach the children little lessons under the guise of a story, sometimes true, sometimes a mere invention. Rolf called them "Fenny's Anecdotes," but I had never discovered an anecdote about crossness.

One day I found myself being severely lectured by Mrs. Markham for teaching her son the doctrine of works. "As though we should be saved by our works, Miss Fenton!" she finished, virtuously.

I was too much puzzled to answer; I had no notion what she meant, until I remembered that I had induced Rolf to part with some of his pocket-money to relieve a poor blind man whom we found sitting by the way-side. Rolf had been sorry for the man, and still more for the gaunt, miserable-looking woman by his side; but when we had gone on our way, followed by voluble Irish blessings, Rolf had rather feelingly lamented his sixpence, and I had told him a little story inculcating the beauty of alms-giving, which had impressed him considerably, and he had retailed a garbled version of it to his mother—hence her rebuke to me. I forget what my defense was, only I remember I repudiated indignantly any such doctrine; but this sort of misunderstanding was constantly arising. If only Rolf would have held his tongue!

But these were mere surface troubles, and I often managed to forget that there was such a person as Mrs. Markham in the world; and, in spite of a few trifling drawbacks, I look back upon this summer as one of the happiest in my life.

I was young and healthy, and I perfectly reveled in the country sights and sounds with which I was surrounded. I hardly knew which I enjoyed most—the long delicious mornings on the beach, when I sat under the break-water taking care of Reggie, or the afternoons in the orchard, with the brown bees humming round the hives and the children playing with Fidgets on the grass, while the old white pony looked over the fence at us, and the sheep nibbled at our side. I used to send Hannah home for an hour or two while I watched over the children; it was hard for her to be so near home and not enjoy Molly's company; and those summer afternoons were lazy times for all of us.

I think Miss Cheriton added largely to my happiness. I had never had a friend since my school-days, and it was refreshing to me to come in contact with this bright young creature. I was a little too grave for my age, and I felt she did me good.

I soon found she resembled my mistress in one thing; she was very unselfish, and thought more of other people's pleasures than her own. She used to say herself that it was only a sublime sort of selfishness that she liked to see every one happy round her. "A gloomy face hinders all enjoyment," was her constant remark. But I never knew any one who excelled more in little kindly acts. She would bring me fruit or flowers almost daily; and when she found I was fond of reading, she selected books for me she thought I should like.

When Mrs. Markham did not use the carriage—a very rare occasion, as she had almost a monopoly of it—she would take us for long country drives, and she would con-

trive all sorts of little surprises for us. Once when we returned from a saunter in the lanes, we found our tea-table laid in the orchard, and Miss Cheriton presiding, in a gay little hat trimmed with corn-flowers and poppies. There was a basket of flowers in the center of the table, and a heap of red and yellow fruit. We had quite a little feast that evening, and all the time we were sitting there, there were broods of chickens running over the grass, that Gay had enticed into the orchard to please the children, and gray rabbits, and an old lame duck that was her pensioner, and went by the name of Cackles.

"Oh, auntie, do have another feast," Joyce would say to her almost daily; but Miss Cheriton could not always be with us; visitors were very plentiful at Marshlands, and Gay's company was much courted by the young people of Netherton and Orton-on-Sea.

I knew Mr. Hawtry was a constant visitor, for we often met him in our walks; and it seemed to me that his face was always set in the direction of Marshlands.

When Rolf was with us he was never allowed to pass without notice, and then he would stop and speak to the children, especially to Joyce, who soon got over her shyness with him.

"Mother says Mr. Hawtry comes to see Aunt Gay," Rolf remarked once, when he was out of hearing; "she told grandpapa so one day, and asked him if it would not be a good thing; and grandpapa laughed and nodded; you know his way. What did mother mean?"

"No doubt she meant that Mr. Hawtry was a kind friend," I returned, evasively. How is one to silence a precocious child? But of course it was easy to understand Mrs. Markham's hint.

I wondered sometimes if Mr. Hawtry were a favored suitor. He and Miss Cheriton certainly seemed on the best of terms; she always seemed glad to see him, but her manner was very frank with him.

I took it into my head that Gay had more than one admirer. I deduced this inference from a slight occurrence that took place one day.

I was on the terrace with the children one morning when a young clergyman in a soft felt hat came up the avenue. I knew him at once as the boyish-faced curate at Netherton Church, who had read the service the last two Sundays. I had liked his voice and manner, they were so reverent, but I remembered that I thought him very young. He was a tall, broad-shouldered young man, and though not exactly handsome, had a bright, pleasant-looking face.

Rolf hailed him at once as an old acquaintance. "Halloo, Mr. Rossiter; it is no use your going on to the house; mother is not well, and can not see you, and Aunt Gay is with the bees."

Mr. Rossiter seemed a little confused at this. He stopped and regarded Rolf with some perplexity.

"I am sorry Mrs. Markham is not well, but perhaps I can see Mr. Cheriton."

"Oh, grandpapa has gone to Orton; there is only me at home; you see, Miss Fenton does not count. If you want Aunt Gay I will show you the way to the kitchen-garden." And as Mr. Rossiter accepted this offer with alacrity, they went off together.

We were going down to the beach that morning, and I was only waiting for Hannah to get the perambulator ready, but as a quarter of an hour elapsed and Rolf did not make his appearance, Joyce and I went in search of him.

I found him standing by the bee-hives, talking to Miss Cheriton and Mr. Rossiter. They all looked very happy, and Mr. Rossiter was laughing at something the boy had said; such a ringing, boyish laugh it was.

When I called Rolf they all looked round, and Miss Cheriton came forward to speak to me. I thought she

looked a little uncomfortable, and I never saw her with such a color.

"Are you going down to the beach? I wish I could come too, it is such a lovely morning, but Mr. Rossiter wants me to go to the schools; Miss Parsons, the schoolmistress, is ill, and they need help. It is so tiresome," speaking with a pettish, spoiled-child air, turning to the young clergyman; "Miss Parsons always does get ill at inconvenient times."

"I know you would not fail us if it were ever so inconvenient," answered Mr. Rossiter, looking full at her—he had such nice clear eyes; "you are far too kind to desert us in such a strait."

But she made no answer to this, and went back to the bee-hive, and after a moment's irresolution Mr. Rossiter followed her.

"Do you like Mr. Rossiter?" asked Rolf, in his blunt way, as we walked down the avenue. "I do, awfully; he is such a brick. He plays cricket with me sometimes, and he has promised to teach me to swim, only mother won't let him, in spite of all grandpapa says about my being brought up like a girl. Grandpapa means me to learn to swim and ride, only mother is so frightened ever since the black pony threw me. I am to have a quieter one next year."

"Have you known Mr. Rossiter long?" I asked, carelessly.

"Oh, pretty long. Mother can't bear him coming so often to the house; she says he is so awkward, and then he is poor. Mother doesn't like poor people; she always says it is their own fault; that they might get on better. Do you know, Fenny, Mr. Rossiter has only two little rooms at Mrs. Saunders's, you know that low house looking on the corn-fields; quite poky little rooms they are, because mother and I went there. Mother asked him if he did not find it dreadfully dull at Netherton, and he laughed and

said, 'Oh, dear no;' he had never been more comfortable; the people at Netherton were so kind and hospitable; and though mother does not like him, he comes just as often as though she did." And I soon verified Rolf's words; Mr. Rossiter came very often to Marshlands.

CHAPTER XVI.

MOLLY.

ONE afternoon, much to Hannah's delight, I took the children to Wheeler's Farm. Rolf did not accompany us; Mrs. Markham had sent up word to the nursery that morning that he was to drive with her into Orton. He had complied with this order rather sulkily, after extracting from me a promise that I would play soldiers with him in the evening.

It was rather a hot July afternoon, but we put Joyce in the perambulator, and Hannah and I carried Reggie by turns; and in spite of the heat we all enjoyed the walk, and there was a lark singing deliciously above the cornfields, and the hedge-rows of Cherry Tree Lane were gay with wild flowers, and every few minutes we came to a peep of the sea.

I recognized Hannah's description when we came in sight of the old black-timbered house; there was the pear-tree in the court-yard, and the mossy trough; a turkey-cock—Gobbler, of course—was strutting about in the sunny road, and from the farm-yard came the cackling of ducks and the hissing of snow-white geese. Just then a little side-gate opened, and a robust-looking woman in a sun-bonnet came out, balancing two pails of water with her strong, bare arms. Hannah exclaimed, "Well, Molly!" and Molly set down her pails and came to meet us.

She kissed Hannah heartily with, "Glad to see thee, lass," and then shook hands with me.

"Come in, come in, and bring the children out of the

sun," she said, in a kind, cheerful voice. "Father is smoking his pipe in the kitchen, and will be fine and glad to see you all. Eh, but I am pleased to see you at Wheeler's Farm, Miss Fenton. Hannah says she has a deal to be grateful to you for, and so have we all, for being good to our girl."

I disclaimed this, and sung Hannah's praises all the time we were crossing the court-yard to the porch.

Molly shook her head, and said, "Nay, she is none too clever," but looked gratified all the same.

She was a plain, homely looking woman, as Hannah said, with high cheek-bones and reddish hair, but she looked kindly at the children and me, and I think we all liked her directly.

"Look whom I am bringing, father!" she exclaimed, proudly; and Michael Sowerby put down his pipe and stared at us.

He was a blue-eyed, ruddy old man, with beautiful snow-white hair, much handsomer than his daughter, and I was not surprised to see Hannah, in her love and reverence, take the white head between her hands and kiss it.

"You will excuse our bad manners, I hope," he said, pushing Hannah gently away, and getting up from his elbow-chair. "So these are Squire Cheriton's grandchildren. He is fine and proud of them, is the squire. Deary me, I remember as if it were yesterday the squire (he was a young man then) bringing in their mother, Miss Violet, to see me when she wasn't bigger than little miss there, and Molly (mother, I mean) said she was as beautiful as an angel."

"Mother is beautifuller now," struck in Joyce, who had been listening to this.

The old farmer chuckled and rubbed his hands.

"Beautifuller, is she? Well, she was always like a picture to look at, was Miss Violet, a deal handsomer and sweeter than madame, as we call her. Eh, what do you

say, my woman?" for Molly was nudging him at this point. "Well, sit ye down, all of you, and Molly will brew us some tea."

"There is Luke crossing the farm-yard," observed Molly, in a peculiar tone; and Hannah took the hint and vanished.

I sat quietly by the window with Reggie on my lap, talking to Michael Sowerby and glancing between the pots of fuchsias and geraniums at a brood of young turkeys that had found their way into the court-yard.

Joyce was making friends with a tabby cat and her kittens, while Molly, still in her white sun-bonnet and tucked-up sleeves, set out the tea-table and opened the oven door, from which proceeded a delicious smell of hot bread. She buttered a pile of smoking cakes presently, talking to us by snatches, and then went off to the dairy, returning with a great yellow jug of milk thick with cream, and some new-laid eggs for the children.

I did not wonder at Hannah's love for her home when I looked round the old kitchen. It was low, and the rafters were smoke-dried and discolored, but it looked so bright and cheery this hot July afternoon, with its red tiles and well-scrubbed tables, and rocking-chairs black with age and polish. The sunshine stole in at the open door, and the fire threw ruddy reflections on the brass utensils and bright-colored china. A sick chicken in a straw basket occupied the hearth with the tabby cat; a large shaggy dog stretched himself across the door-way, and regarded us from between his paws.

"It is Luke's dog, Rover; he is as sensible as a human being," observed Molly; and before we commenced tea she fetched him a plate of broken meat from the larder, her hospitality extending even to the dumb creatures.

A wooden screen shut us off from the fire. From my place at the table I had a good view of the inner kitchen

and a smaller court-yard with a well in it; a pleasant breeze came through the open door.

As soon as the children were helped, Hannah came back looking rather shamefaced but extremely happy, and followed by Luke Armstrong. He greeted us rather shyly, but seated himself at Molly's bidding. He was a short, sturdy-looking young fellow, with crisp, curling hair, and an honest, good-tempered face. He seemed intelligent and well-mannered, and I was disposed to be pleased with Hannah's sweetheart.

I found afterward from Molly, when she took me into the dairy, that Michael Sowerby had consented to recognize the engagement, and that it was looked upon as a settled thing in the household.

"Hannah is the youngest of us girls, and a bit spoiled," observed Molly, apologetically. "I told father it was all nonsense, and Hannah was only a chit, but it seemed he had no mind to cross her. The folks at Scroggins's Mill is not much to our taste, but Luke is the best of the bunch, and a good, steady lad, with a head on his shoulders. He was for going to London to seek his fortune," continued Molly, "for Miller Armstrong is a poor sort of father to him, and Martin elbows him out of all chances of getting any of the money; but Squire Hawtry of the Red Farm, where Lydia lives as dairy-maid, has just lost his head man, and he offered Luke the place. That is what he had been telling Hannah this afternoon in the farm-yard; so if Hannah is a good girl, as I tell her, and saves her bit of money, and Luke works his best, Squire Hawtry will be letting them have one of the new cottages he has built for the farm servants, and a year or two may see them settled in it to begin life together." And here Molly drew a hard, work-roughened hand across her eyes, as though her own words touched her.

"I am very glad for Hannah's sake," I returned. "She is a good girl, and deserves to be happy."

"Ah, they are all good girls," replied Molly. "Hannah is no better than the rest, though we have a bit spoiled her, being the youngest, and mother dead. There's Martin at Scroggins's Mill wants Lydia, but Lyddy is too sensible to be listening to the likes of him. 'No, no, Lyddy,' I say, 'whatever you do, never marry a man who makes an idol of his money; he will love his guineas more than his wife; better be doing work all your life and die single, as I shall, than be mistress of Scroggins's Mill if Martin is to be master.'"

"You give your sisters very good advice," I returned.

"I have not much else to give them," was the abrupt answer; "but they are good girls, and know I mean well. The boys are rather a handful, especially Dan, who is always bird-catching on Sunday, and won't see the sin of it. But there, one must take boys as one finds them, and not put ourselves in the place of Providence. They want a deal of patience, and patience is not in my nature, and if Dan comes to a bad end with his lame leg and bird-traps, nobody must blame me, who has always a scolding ready for him if he will take it."

I saw Dan presently under rather disadvantageous circumstances, for as we came out of the dairy who should come riding under the great pear-tree but Mr. Hawtry, with a red-headed boy sitting behind him, with a pair of dirty hands grasping his coat. I never saw such a freckled face nor such red hair in my life, and he looked at Molly so roguishly from under Mr. Hawtry's shoulder, there was no mistaking that this was the family scapegrace.

"Good-evening, Molly," called out Mr. Hawtry, cheerfully; "I am carrying home Dan in pillion fashion, because the rogue has dropped his crutch into the mill-dam, and he could not manage with the other. I found him in difficulties, sitting under the mill hedge, very tired and hungry. You will let him have his tea, Molly, as it was accident, and not mischief. I forgot to say the other

crutch is lying in the road broken; it broke itself—didn't it, Dan?—in its attempt to get him home;" and here Mr. Hawtry's eyes twinkled, but he could not be induced, neither could Dan, to explain the mystery of the broken crutch.

"You will come to a bad end, Dan," remarked Molly, severely, as she lifted down the boy, not overgently; but she forbore to shake him, as he was wholly in her power—a piece of magnanimity on Molly's part.

Mr. Hawtry dismounted, perhaps to see that Dan had merciful treatment; but he need not have been afraid, Molly had too large a heart to be hard on a crippled boy, and one who was her special torment and pet. Molly could not have starved a dog, and certainly not red-headed Dan.

He was soon established in his special chair, with a thick wedge of cold buttered cake in his hand. Scolding did not hurt as long as Molly saw to his comforts, and Dan looked as happy as a king, in spite of his lost crutches.

Mr. Hawtry came into the kitchen, and when he saw us I thought he started a little as though he were surprised, and he came up to me at once.

"Good-evening, Miss Fenton; I did not expect to see you here, and my little friend, too," as Joyce as usual ran up to him. "What a lovely evening you have for your walk home! You did not bring Miss Cheriton with you?"

"No; she has visitors this afternoon; the children and I have had our tea here, and now it is Reggie's bed-time."

"Shall I call Hannah?" he returned, hastily, for I was putting Reggie in his perambulator. "I saw her walking down the orchard with Luke Armstrong and Matthew." And as I thanked him he bade Molly good-bye, and, putting his arm through his horse's bridle, in another moment we could hear a clear whistle.

Hannah came at once; she looked happy and rosy, and whispered to Molly as we went down the court-yard to-

gether. Mr. Hawtry was at the horse-block; as he mounted he called me by name, and asked if the little girl would like a ride.

I knew he would be careful, but all the same I longed to refuse, only Joyce looked disappointed and ready to cry.

"Oh, nurse, do let me!" she implored, in such a coaxing voice.

"My horse is as quiet as a lamb. You may safely trust her, Miss Fenton," he said so persuasively I let myself be overruled. It was very pretty to see Joyce as he held her before him and rode down the lane. She had such a nice color, and her eyes were bright and sparkling as she laughed back at me.

It was very kind of Mr. Hawtry. It seemed to me he never lost any opportunity of giving children pleasure. But I was glad when the ride ended and I lifted Joyce to the ground.

She clasped me tightly in her glee. "It was so nice, so werry nice, nursey dear!" she exclaimed.

As I looked up and thanked Mr. Hawtry, I found that he was watching us, smiling.

"I am afraid your faith was not equal to Joyce's," he said, rather mischievously. "I would not let Peter canter, out of pity for your fears."

"I beg your pardon," I stammered, rather distressed by this, "but I can not help being afraid of everything. You see the children are intrusted to me."

"I was only joking," he returned, and he spoke so gently. "You are quite right, and one can not be too careful over children; but I knew I could trust old Peter;" and then he lifted his hat and cantered down the lane. He could not have spoken more courteously; his manner pleased me.

It caused me a little revulsion when Mrs. Markham met us at the gate with a displeased countenance. She mo-

tioned to Hannah to take the children to the house, and detained me with a haughty gesture.

"Nurse," she said, harshly, "I am extremely surprised at the liberty you take in my sister's absence. I am quite sure she would be excessively angry at your taking the children to Wheeler's Farm without even informing me of your intention."

"I mentioned it to Miss Cheriton," I returned, somewhat nettled at this, for Gay had warmly approved of our little excursion.

"Miss Cheriton is not the mistress of the house," she replied, in the same galling tone. "If you had consulted me, I should certainly not have given my consent. I think a servant's relatives are not proper companions for my little niece, and, indeed, I rather wonder at your choosing to associate with them yourself," with a concealed sneer hidden under a polished manner.

"Mrs. Markham," I returned, speaking as quietly as I could, "I should certainly not have taken the children to Wheeler's Farm without my mistress's sanction. I had her free permission to do so; she knew the Sowerbys were highly respectable, and, for my own part, I wished to give pleasure to Hannah, as I take a great interest in her."

"I shall certainly write to my sister on the subject," was her answer to this. "You must have entirely mistaken her meaning, and I owe it to her to watch over her children."

My temper was decidedly rising.

"You need not trouble yourself," I replied, coldly; "my mistress knows everything I do. I should have written to her myself to-night; she has perfect confidence in me, and I have never acted against her wishes; my conscience is quite clear about this afternoon, but I should not have taken Rolf without your permission."

"I should hope not," still more haughtily; but I would not listen to any more; I was not her servant—I could not

have served that hard mistress. I found nothing to reverence in her cold, self-absorbed nature, and without reverence, service would be bitter drudgery.

As I passed down the avenue a little sadly, I came upon a pretty scene: a tea-table had been set under one of the elms, and Gay had evidently been presiding over it; but the feast had been long over. She was standing by the table now, crumbling sweet cakes for the peacock. Lion was sitting on his haunches watching her, and Fidgets was barking furiously, and a little behind her stood Mr. Rossiter.

Mrs. Markham swept up to them, and I could hear her say, in a frosty voice that showed evident ill-temper: "Why has not Benson removed the things? It is nearly seven, and we must go in to dress for dinner; you know Mr. Hawtry is coming."

"I was not aware of it, Adelaide"—how well I knew that careless voice!—"but it is of no consequence, that I can see; Mr. Hawtry is always here."

"He can not come too often," in a pointed manner. "We all think highly of Mr. Hawtry, I know. Oh, are you going, Mr. Rossiter? Well, perhaps it is rather late. What are you doing, Gay?" so sharply that though I had reached the house I heard her, and turned my head to look.

Benson and the under-footman were coming out of the side door, but Mrs. Markham stood alone under the trees. Gay was sauntering down the avenue with the young curate still at her side, and Lion was following them, and I wondered if Mrs. Markham saw her stop and pick that rose.

I went up to the nursery rather thoughtfully after that. I knew girls were odd and contrary sometimes. Mr. Rossiter was very nice; he was a good, earnest young man, and I liked his sermons; but was it possible that Gay could seriously prefer him to Mr. Hawtry? or was she just flirting

with him *pour passer le temps,* after that odious custom of some girls? But I could not believe it somehow of Gay Cheriton; she was so simple, so unselfish, so free from vanity. It needed a coarser nature than hers to play this sort of unfeeling game. "We shall see," I said to myself, as I put Reggie into his cot; and then I sat down and wrote to Mrs. Morton.

CHAPTER XVII.

A PLEASANT SURPRISE.

THE next day I had a delicious surprise.

We were sitting in the orchard before the children's dinner; they had taken their noonday sleep early, and I had brought them out again.

We were all huddled together on a little grass hillock, for I was telling Rolf and Joyce a story; Reggie was talking to the flowers he had gathered. He had quite a little language of his own to supplement his scanty stock of words. I heard "gurgle-da" very often, so I knew he was happy, my bonny boy, whom I loved better every day. All at once I looked up, and there was my beloved mistress standing by the little white gate watching us, and she looked so pale and lovely, with the sun shining upon her brown hair that a curious fear crossed me that she was too good and beautiful to live. Why do we always say that, as though things of beauty were rare upon earth?

"Run, darlings, there is mother!" I exclaimed; and Joyce gave quite a shout of joy as she raced down the orchard. It was pretty to see Reggie following her as fast as his fat legs could carry him. He fell down, but picked himself up, still holding his flowers, and then thrust them in his mother's face as she stooped to kiss him. I detained Rolf by me until Mrs. Morton had greeted her little ones, but she soon came up to us, holding out her hand to me with such a kind look.

"How are you, Merle? But I need not ask; you are almost as rosy as the children. How fat and well they look! Reggie is lovelier than ever, and as for Joyce"—and she could hardly turn her attention to Rolf, who was regarding her with great curiosity.

"Don't you wish you were rosy too, Aunt Violet?" he asked, as she kissed him.

I thought she smiled a little sadly as she answered:

"My rosy-cheeked days are over, Rolf dear; I would rather the children had them. Oh, I am so pleased to see the improvement in my little Joyce, Merle; she looks a different creature. You told me so, of course, but I wanted to see her with my own eyes. You have been so good to them all this time; oh, I know that."

She sat down beside me on the hillock, and lifted Reggie on her lap, and Joyce nestled close to her.

"Is it not good of my husband, Merle, to bring me down here just for a few hours to see my children? I asked him last night if he could spare me, and he promised that we should come together. We are going to Scotland to-morrow by the night mail, and I could not have gone happily without seeing my darlings."

"I am glad you are going, Mrs. Morton; you are not looking well;" for she had grown very thin during these five weeks, and there was an air of delicacy about her that I did not like to see. "It is quite time you should have some rest."

She looked a little amused at that.

"That is the last thing I shall get in Scotland. If we were going alone, my husband and I, there might be some probability of getting a little time to one's self, but we are to stay with the Egertons. They are very gay people, and have a large party for the shooting season. Lady Florence Egerton is one of the most incessant talkers I know."

I did not like to hear this. If only she could have stayed

in this sweet place, among her own people, she would have been rested and refreshed.

She echoed my sigh merrily, for she seemed in excellent spirits.

"Don't be so anxious about me, my good Merle. I have the best husband in the world to take care of me, if I do fall ill, which is very unlikely."

Oh, the blindness of an affectionate woman when her husband is concerned!

"I think I am very fortunate to be able to leave my children so comfortably. You are a tower of strength to me, Merle. Now you will be quite happy to remain here for another month or six weeks, until we come back from Scotland?" looking at me rather wistfully.

"Quite happy," I returned, frankly, "if only I could give Mrs. Markham satisfaction, which I always fail to do;" for Rolf, finding us dull company, had decoyed Joyce down the orchard to hunt for a gray rabbit they had lost, and I could speak without reservation.

"Tell me all about it," she said, gently. "I am going to talk to Adelaide, but I should like your version first."

Oh, the comfort of pouring out all my little grievances and worries into my mistress's attentive ear! She listened with such patience, and though she said little, one was so sure with whom lay her sympathy.

"We must be very careful, Merle. No, I am not blaming you, you have done nothing wrong; but Adelaide, as mistress of my father's house, needs a certain amount of consideration from us. If she wishes you to consult her about the children's walks and drives, I suppose we must give in, for the sake of peace; but do not permit any interference in the actual management of the children; use a little tact when you have to contest an order you feel is not judicious. Do not worry yourself if she blames you unjustly, whatever Adelaide thinks of you, you are right in my eyes. I will tell her myself that I have no objection to your tak-

ing the children to Wheeler's Fair. Molly is as good a creature as ever lived, and I remember how my father used to take me when the other Molly, Hannah's mother, was alive, and what a treat it was to my childish eyes to see her skim the cream in those great yellow pans in the dairy."

We sat talking in this way for some time, and then Mr. Morton and Mrs. Markham joined us. I thought she looked a little taken aback when he came up to me and frankly shook hands. He had never done so before, but I had noticed lately a growing interest and cordiality in his manner to me. He was a cautious man, who never let enthusiasm run away with him. He would sift a person thoroughly before he manifested any degree of liking; neither would he indorse his wife's opinion of me until I had proven myself worthy of his respect.

It was pleasant to hear him address me as Miss Fenton, and praise the children's looks. He stood talking to me apart for some minutes, much to Mrs. Markham's chagrin. No doubt she had armed herself with a list of grievances, and was highly displeased to find that I stood so high in my employer's favor. Prejudice is always hard to overcome, and Mrs. Markham was strongly prejudiced against my humble self; but when I remembered Uncle Keith, and my girlish distaste for him, I was ready to admit that I deserved some sort of punishment.

We had a delightful afternoon on the beach. My dear mistress accompanied us, and shortly afterward Miss Cheriton and Mr. Morton made their appearance, accompanied by Mr. Hawtry. He had ridden up to Marshlands on business, and had been decoyed into an hour's idleness.

What a pleasant time we had!

Mrs. Morton and I sat under the break-water, watching the children help their father as he built up a mighty sand fortress. To our great amusement, Mr. Hawtry worked

too, while Gay assisted Reggie to fill his bucket with smooth white pebbles for the ramparts.

"Isn't Alick ridiculously busy?" laughed Gay, as she passed. "I do believe he is quite happy to find a spade in his hand again. And do look at Farmer Roger," for she sometimes naughtily called him by that name; "he is working as hard as though he were among his hay-makers."

I wonder if Mr. Hawtry heard her, for he threw down his spade and came up to us with a droll, ashamed sort of look.

"I believe I am half a child still," he said, throwing himself down on the sand. "I have often envied the little rogues digging their trenches; they do seem to believe in their own work. You are laughing at me, Mrs. Morton, but your own husband is just as bad."

"If you knew how glad I am to see him with the children!" she returned, with a sort of misty smile. "I do not think grown-up people's play half so sensible. I know Miss Fenton agrees with me, do you not, Merle?"

It was nice of her to draw me into the conversation.

I saw Mr. Hawtry looking at me inquiringly, and I said, quietly: "I think the best people are those who never outgrow their childhood. We are apt to laugh at children," I went on, for my mistress was near me, and I was talking to her more than to Mr. Hawtry, "and yet their perfect faith teaches us many lessons; they have to contend with so great a difficulty."

"What special difficulty do you mean, Miss Fenton?"

"The difficulty of expression; their language does not allow of full expression; their wonder bubbles over, but they find no word to convey their wonderment."

"Miss Fenton is a philosopher," observed my mistress, softly. "We often talk about these things, Roger" (she called him Roger quite as a matter of course); "thinking aloud is very pleasant in company sometimes."

"Miss Fenton seems to think to some purpose," interposed Mr. Hawtry. I thought he seemed a little amused. "It would be a good thing if she could teach other young ladies to be as unconventional and useful."

I found this speech a little embarrassing. He evidently knew all about my theory, and his words seemed to imply perfect approval of it, but I was not sufficiently at my ease to meet his meaning half-way; on the contrary, I was rather provoked at his breaking in on our conversation. I made an excuse, and went down to the margin of the water, where Miss Cheriton and Reggie were playing touch-last with the waves, and there we stayed until Mr. Morton looked at his watch and gave the signal for our return, and then we all went home together.

On our way Miss Cheriton took me by the arm, and said, merrily: "We are all going to have a nursery tea this evening. Alick and Mr. Hawtry are both coming up. Don't you think you had better hurry home to prepare for us, Merle?" for she always called me Merle now.

I needed no second bidding, and leaving Joyce in her care, very quickly overtook Hannah, and with Susan's help we had soon arranged the tea-table.

I think every one enjoyed themselves; they would insist on crowding round the tea-table, though it would hardly hold them, and Mr. Morton teased his wife about an incident in her childish days, when she had quarreled with Adelaide about some strawberry jam at this very table.

"I do love this old nursery, Alick," she returned, plaintively. "It is a treat even to drink out of the old blue cups again. Nurse Parfitt used to be so proud of the old blue china." And after tea she took her husband to see the cot where she and Gay had slept when they were tiny children, and we could hear them laughing together over the prints in the little black frames. I had to fetch something for Reggie, and I found them standing hand in hand before the "Five Senses." I think she was telling

him something that touched him, for he was looking wonderfully interested, but there was a sort of pain in his face too.

Mr. Hawtry was on the window-seat with Reggie, and his horse was at the door.

"Thank you for a very pleasant hour, Miss Fenton," he said, holding out his hand. "I think we are all the better for an afternoon with the children." And then he and Mr. Morton went away.

My dear mistress took leave of us soon after that, for they were going back to town that evening. I could see her heart was full as she bade the children good-bye, but she was very brave, and smiled at us to the last.

Gay came up to us by and by. She said her father and Adelaide were dining out, and she meant to spend the evening with us. I thought she looked just a trifle dull, as though something had gone wrong since tea. I wondered if she were sorry to have missed Mr. Rossiter, who, we heard had called that afternoon.

She sat by me very quietly as I undressed Reggie, and listened to Joyce's prayers, but when the children were in bed she asked me to come with her into the garden, as it was a sultry evening. Hannah and Rolf were cutting out pictures to paste in the scrap-book, and I knew I could safely trust them, and might indulge in an hour s enjoyment.

It was just after sunset, and Gay proposed that we should go down to our favorite seat in the orchard—"that is if you are not afraid of the dews, Merle," she added; "but there is such a pretty peep of the corn-fields from there, and if the moon rises early the effect is beautiful." I was too young and strong to be afraid of anything; so we speedily found our way to the orchard, followed, as usual, by Lion and Fidgets.

The sky was warm with that pink afterglow that follows the setting sun, and the evening star was glittering near

the edge of a tiny cloud. There was an indescribable hush and stillness over everything, as though nature were taking sweet rest, and her dreams were pleasant. All sorts of faint scents came to us from flowers and odoriferous shrubs and hedge-rows; far off we could hear the hollow boom of the waves upon the shore.

Gay was very silent at first; she sat stroking Lion's head with an unusually abstracted air, and then suddenly roused up and began to talk.

"Merle, are you very much afraid of people's opinions? I mean, do you let yourself be influenced by them?"

"I am afraid not," I returned, rather surprised at this beginning; "I should hardly be in my present position, Miss Gay, if I had minded very much what my little world said of me."

"I wish I were like you," she sighed. "You are so strong and brave; you carve your own way through life so cleverly. I never knew I was such a coward until now. I do mind Adelaide's sneers so dreadfully. Oh! she can say such bitter things; and then, I should hate to disappoint father."

This was very ambiguous, and I waited to hear more. She began again presently.

"Merle, should you not think I was a very unfit person to be a poor man's wife? How astonished you look! But one must talk of such things sometimes, and I never speak on these subjects to Adelaide. Suppose I am not a bit in earnest, and am only talking for the sake of argument, still, you might give me your opinion."

"I hardly know, Miss Gay," I replied; for this was quite a problem to me, and how are we short-sighted mortals to judge of any human being's possibilities? "You seem to me to fit your present life exactly; you wear your existence as lightly as a glove; your surroundings suit you as much as you suit them."

"You are quite right, Merle; no one could be happier."

"I should think in any change of lot you must suffer loss," I continued, trying to puzzle it out—"unless," hesitating, "you became mistress of a house like Marshlands: a house where there would be plenty and comfort, horses to ride and dumb animals to pet, and a master who would let you do as you like." I did not dare to make my meaning more plain, but, of course, she guessed at once that I was alluding to the Red Farm and Mr. Hawtry, for she colored very much.

"Oh, but I know of no such place where I could be happy, Merle," she said, lifting her head a little, and her face was full of delicate scorn. "There may be corn and oil, and plenty of fat kine in Egypt, but one may not want to go to Egypt after all;" and then I understood that Mr. Hawtry was not in her thoughts. "But all the same I should hate to be poor," she continued, petulantly. "Fancy saying good-bye to Bonnie—my own dear Bonnie—and having to live in a shabby little house with a few feet of ground for a garden, and to trim one's own hats, with a new gown about once a year."

"I do not think you would care for your environment, Miss Gay." And I added, wickedly, not meaning it in the least. "No man, however good, would be worth such a sacrifice."

"I don't know about that," she returned, abruptly. "I suppose if one loved a person, one could be capable of sacrifice, but it must be the real thing, and no mistake about it; and how is one to be sure?" And then she gave herself a little shake and changed the subject; but all the same I could see there were tears in her eyes as she stooped to pat Lion.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE RED FARM.

I PERCEIVED a great change in Mrs. Markham after my mistress's visit. She took less notice of the children, sent

fewer messages to the nursery, ceased to interfere in the nursery arrangements, and often ignored my presence if she chanced to meet me in the hall or garden. Her manner convinced me that she was deeply offended by her sister's patronage of me. Very probably Mr. Morton had spoken a few forcible words in my defense. They made her understand that they trusted me implicitly, and that any interference in my department would be displeasing to them. It was easy to read this from her averted looks.

Now and then I heard a word or two about "Violet," "ridiculous infatuation," when I passed the open drawing-room door. Rolf once asked me curiously why his mother disliked me so. "You aren's so very wicked, are you, Fenny? Is it very wicked to be stuck up? Mother is so fond of using that word, you know."

I tried not to listen to Rolf. I could afford to be magnanimous, for I was very happy just then. Gay's partiality for me was evident, and I soon conceived the warmest attachment for her. She seized every opportunity of running up to the nursery for a few minutes' chat, and she often joined us on the beach. One afternoon she asked to accompany us in a country ramble. Hannah had gone to Wheeler's Farm to have tea with Molly, and Luke was to walk home with her in the evening. I thought how they would enjoy that walk through the corn-fields and down the dim, scented lanes. Life would look as sweet to them as to richer lovers; youth and health and love being the threefold cord that can not lightly be broken. Gay made the excuse that she would be useful in taking care of Joyce while I wheeled Reggie in his perambulator; I overheard her saying this to Mrs. Markham, but her speech only elicited a scornful reply.

"If Miss Fenton encourages Hannah in gadding about, there is not the slightest need for you to take her place, Gay; but, of course, you will please yourself."

"Oh, I always please myself, Addie," returned Gay,

cheerfully, "and I shall enjoy a ramble among the lanes."

And, indeed, we had a delightful afternoon gathering wild flowers, and resting ourselves in any shady corner where a fallen tree or stile invited us.

We were gathering some poppies that grew among the corn when Gay called me. She looked a little anxious.

"Merle, I am really afraid there is a storm coming up. You were noticing just now how close and sultry it felt; those clouds look ominous, and we are a mile and a half from Marshlands."

I felt conscience-stricken at her words. We had been talking and laughing, and had not perceived how the sunshine had faded. Certainly, the clouds had a lurid, thunderous look, and the birds were flying low, and seemed fussy and uncertain in their movements. True, the storm might not break on us for another half hour; but we should never get the children home in that time. I thought of Reggie with dismay.

"What shall we do, Miss Gay?" I returned, hurriedly. "It would be nearer to Wheeler's Farm. We might take refuge there."

"Wait a moment," was her answer; "we shall be drenched before we get there. The Red Farm is not half a mile off. I think we had better take the children there, and then Mr. Hawtry will send us home in his wagonette. Come—come! Why do you hesitate, Merle? He is father's old friend; and even Adelaide would find no fault with us if we took refuge at the Red Farm."

I held my peace, for of course Miss Cheriton must know what her father and sister would approve; but I did not like the notion at all, and I followed her somewhat reluctantly down the field. I would much rather have gone to Wheeler's Farm, and put ourselves under Molly's protection. Most likely they would have placed a covered cart or wagon at our disposal, and we should all have en-

joyed the fun. Gay was so simple and unconventional that she saw no harm at all in going to the Red Farm; but I knew what Aunt Agatha would say, and I took all my notions of propriety from her.

But the Fates were against us, for just as we reached the stile there was Squire Hawtry himself, mounted as usual on brown Peter, trotting quietly home. He checked Peter at once, and spoke in rather a concerned voice.

"Miss Cheriton, this is very imprudent. There will be a storm directly. Those children will never get home."

He spoke to her, but I fancied he meant that reproachful look for me. No doubt I was the one to blame.

"It was very wrong," I stammered; "but we were talking and did not notice. I want Miss Cheriton to hurry to Wheeler's Farm."

"Oh, nonsense!" he said, abruptly; but it was such a pleasant abruptness; "the Red Farm is a mile nearer. Give the little girl to me, Miss Fenton, and then you can walk on quickly. I will soon have her under shelter."

There was no disputing this sensible advice, and as soon as Peter was trotting on with his double burden I followed as quickly as possible with Reggie. We were only just in time, after all. As I wheeled Reggie under the porch of the Red Farm the first heavy drops pattered down.

I was in such haste that I only stole a quick glance at the low red house, with its curious mullioned windows and stone porch. I had noticed, as we came up the gravel walk, a thick privet hedge, and a yew walk, and a grand old walnut-tree in the center of the small lawn, with a circular seat. There were seats, too, in the porch, and a sweet smell of jasmine and clematis. Then the door opened, and there stood Mr. Hawtry, with a beaming face, and Joyce beside him, evidently pleased to welcome us all to the Red Farm.

I lifted Reggie out of the perambulator and carried him into the hall. It had some handsome oak furniture in it:

heavy carved cabinets and chairs, and a tall clock. There was a tiger skin lying before the fire-place. An open glass door led into a charming old-fashioned garden, with a bowling-green and a rustic arbor, and a long, straight walk, bordered with standard rose-trees.

A tall, thin woman, with a placid face and gray hair shook hands with Gay. Mr. Hawtry introduced her to me as "Mrs. Cornish, my worthy housekeeper," and then bade her, with good-humored peremptoriness, "to get tea ready as soon as possible in the oak room."

"I am afraid the drawing-room has rather a chilly aspect," he continued, throwing open a door. "Should you not prefer sitting in my den, Miss Gay, until Mrs. Cornish tells us tea is ready?"

I was sorry when Miss Cheriton pronounced in favor of the den. I liked the look of that drawing-room, with its three long, narrow windows opening on to the bowling-green. It had faint, yellowish paneled walls and an old-fashioned blue couch, and there was some beautiful china on an Indian cabinet. No doubt that was where his mother and Miss Agnes used to sit. Perhaps the room held sad memories for him, and he was glad to close the door upon them.

Mr. Hawtry's den was a small front room, with a view of the privet hedge and the walnut-tree, and was plainly furnished with a round table, and well-worn leather chairs, the walls lined with mahogany book-shelves, his gun and a pair of handsomely mounted pistols occupying the place of honor over the mantel-piece. Joyce called it an ugly room, but I thought it looked comfortable and home-like, with its pleasant litter of magazines and papers; and Gay said at once:

"I do like this old den of yours, Mr. Hawtry; it is such a snug room, especially in winter, when father and I have come in after a long, cold ride."

"You do not come as often now, Miss Gay," he said, looking at her a little keenly.

She colored, as though the remark embarrassed her, and seemed bent on excusing herself.

"I am such a busy person, you see, and now I spend all my leisure time with the children. Am I not a devoted aunt, Merle?"

"You are very good to give us so much of your company," I returned, for I saw she wanted me to speak; but just then a flash of lightning frightened Joyce away from the window, and she came to me for protection. Reggie, too, began to cry, and I had some trouble in pacifying him.

Gay good-naturedly came to my assistance.

"Suppose we take the children into the other room and show them the shells; it would distract their attention from the storm. We will leave you to read your paper in peace, Mr. Hawtry." But he insisted on going with us. The cabinet had a curious lock, he assured us, and no one could open it but himself.

The children were delighted with the shells, and a little green Indian idol perfectly fascinated Reggie. He kissed the grinning countenance with intense affection, and murmured, "Pretty, pretty." My attention was attracted to a miniature in a velvet frame. It was a portrait of a round-faced, happy-looking girl, with brown eyes, rather like Mr. Hawtry's.

"That was my sister Agnes," he said, with a sigh, and for a moment his face clouded over. "She died two years ago, after years of intense suffering. That miniature was painted when she was eighteen. She was a bright, healthy creature then. Look, that was her couch, where she spent her days. There is a mystery in some lives, Miss Fenton. I never understood why she was permitted to suffer all these years."

"No, indeed," observed Gay, who heard this. "Violet

and I were so fond of her; she could be so merry in spite of her pain. I think some of my pleasantest hours have been spent in this room. How pleased she used to be when I had anything new to tell her or show her. I do not wonder you miss her, Mr. Hawtry; I have always been sorry for you."

I thought he seemed sorry for himself, for I had never seen him look so sad. I wished then that Gay had not brought us back to this room; it was evidently full of relics of the past, when womanly hands had busied themselves for the comfort of the dearly loved son and brother.

The little round table beside the couch, with its inlaid work-box and stand of favorite books, must have been Miss Agnes's, but the netting case and faded silk bag on the other side of the fire-place, with the spectacles lying on the closed Bible, must have belonged to the mother. How sorely must he have missed them! Few men would have cared to have preserved these little homely treasures; they would have swept them away with the dead past. But now and then a strong manly character has this element of feminine tenderness.

I think my look must have expressed sympathy, for Mr. Hawtry came up to me as I stood alone by the window (for Gay was still showing the shells to the children) and said, a little abruptly:

"It is good of you to be sorry for me, but time heals all wounds, and, in spite of pain and loneliness, one would not call them back to suffer." And then his voice changed to a lower key. "I wish Agnes could have known you, Miss Fenton; how she would have sympathized with your work! All good women are fond of little children, but she doted on them. There were so many children in the church-yard on the day she was buried."

I was too much touched to answer, but he went on as though he did not notice my silence.

"You seem very happy in your work."

"Very happy."

"One can see that; you have a most contented expression; it almost makes one envy you. I wonder how you came to think such work was possible."

I do not know how it was, but I found myself telling Mr. Hawtry all about Aunt Agatha and the cottage at Putney. I even let fall a word or two about my miserable deficiency. I am not sure what I said, but I certainly saw him smile, as though something amused him.

I was almost sorry when Mrs. Cornish called us into the oak room, and yet a most pleasant hour followed. Mrs. Cornish poured out the tea, and the children were very good; even Reggie behaved quite nicely. The room was very dark and low, and furnished entirely with oak, but a cheery little fire burned on the hearth; and though the thunder rain beat heavily against the window, it seemed only to add to our merriment. Mr. Hawtry had promised to drive us home in the wagonette, but we dared not venture until the storm was over.

When the children had finished their bread and honey they played about the room, while we gathered round the window.

Mr. Hawtry spoke most to Gay, and I sat by and listened. He spoke about Mr. Rossiter presently.

"I think him a capital fellow," he said, in his hearty manner; "and it quite puzzles me why Mrs. Markham dislikes him so; she is always finding fault with him."

"Oh, there is no accounting for Adelaide's likes and dislikes," replied Gay, a little impatiently. "Sometimes I think she would have found fault with Saint Paul himself, if she had known him."

Mr. Hawtry laughed. "Rossiter is not a Saint Paul, certainly, but he is a downright honest fellow, and that is what I like. Perhaps he is not a shining light in the pulpit, but he is so earnest and painstaking that we can not blame his want of eloquence. He is just the companion

that suits me; always cheerful and always good-tempered, and ready to talk on any subject. I must say I am rather partial to Walter Rossiter."

Now I wonder what made Gay look so pleased, and why her eyes beamed so softly on Mr. Hawtry. But she said nothing, and Mr. Rossiter's name soon dropped out of the conversation.

Very shortly after that the rain cleared, and the wagonette was ordered. While we were waiting for it, Gay asked me to come with her into the dairy, to see Lydia Sowerby. I was anxious to see Hannah's sister, but I own I was not prepossessed with her appearance. She had red hair, like Molly—indeed, most of the Sowerbys had red hair—but she was far plainer than Molly, and it struck me her face looked hard.

I had to own by and by, however, that my first impressions were wrong, for a few moments afterward when Mrs. Cornish carried Reggie into the dairy, Lydia's hard-featured face softened in a wonderful manner, and such a pleasant smile redeemed her plainness.

"Oh, do let me hold him a moment," she said, eagerly; "he reminds me of little Davie, our poor little brother who died. Hannah has talked so much about him." And when Mrs. Cornish relinquished him reluctantly, she carried him about the dairy with such pride and joy that Mrs. Cornish nodded her head at her benignantly.

"You are a rare one for children, Lyddy; I never saw a woman to beat you. She is always begging me to ask Dan," she went on, turning to us. "She spoils Dan hugely, and so does Molly; they are both of them soft-hearted, though you would not believe it to look at them; but many a soft fruit has a rough rind," finished Mrs. Cornish.

Reggie was asleep all the way home, but Joyce prattled incessantly. I took them into the house as quietly as I

could, after bidding Mr. Hawtry good-night. I thought it best to leave Gay to explain things to Mrs. Markham.

But all that evening, until I slept, a sentence of Mr. Hawtry's haunted me: "I wish my sister Agnes could have known you, Miss Fenton." Why did he wish that? And yet, and yet I should have been glad to have known Anges Hawtry, too.

CHAPTER XIX.

A CATASTROPHE.

ABOUT three weeks after my mistress's visit something very terrible happened. I wish the history of that day would get itself told without the pain of telling it. My life has been a happy one, thank God! I have been "led by paths that I have not known," but even now I never look back upon that day without a shudder. Oh, Reggie, my darling! But God was good to us, and the danger passed; still, it will be only in Heaven that we shall bear to look back on past perils without dimness of eyes and failing of heart!

I had never left Rolf alone with the children for a moment since Judson had told me of his mischievous propensities. I had grown fond of Rolf, and he was certainly very much improved; but I always felt he was not to be trusted, and either Hannah or I kept a strict guard over him. He was never permitted to enter the nursery in the morning; if we went out, he joined us, as a matter of course; but more than once when he begged for admittance I had refused it decidedly. Hannah was always busy in the morning, and the children slept for an hour, and if there were time I liked to take Joyce to her lessons, or to set her some baby-task of needle-work, and Rolf always made her so rough.

On a rainy afternoon or in the evening she would be allowed to romp with Rolf, and they always played to-

gether on the beach. Rolf was more in his element out-of-doors. Judson had been very unwell for some days; she was a sickly sort of body, and was often ailing; but just then she had a threatening of quinsy, and seemed very feverish and suffering.

Her room was close to the nursery, and it was only sheer humanity for Hannah or myself to go in now and then and see what we could do for her. I had got it into my head that she was somewhat neglected by the other servants. I know Gay thought so, for she asked me to do what I could for her.

She had been ordered some linseed poultices that morning, and Mrs. Markham had come up to the nursery, and asked me very civilly if I would apply them, as the upper house-maid was away, and Susan was very clumsy and helpless.

"I will stay with the children," she said, quite graciously, for her; "and Hannah is here." And as I knew Rolf was in the garden with his aunt, I could not find a loop-hole for excuse. I do not think I was wrong now, for how could I have refused such a request? But the Fates were against me. That is a foolish and untrue expression, but I will let it stand.

The poultices were far from hot, and poor Judson, who seemed in great pain and very nervous about herself, begged me to go down to the housekeeper's room and make some more. "It is no use Susan making them, and Mrs. Rumble is always so busy," she whispered; "do go yourself, Miss Fenton, and then I shall be more sure of hot ones."

The housekeeper's room lay at the end of a long passage leading from the hall, shut in with red baize doors. These swing-doors deadened sound, and that was why I did not hear Rolf come in from the garden and scamper upstairs.

The front-door bell rang immediately afterward, and

some visitors were asked into the drawing-room. I knew Gay was about the premises, and the idea never crossed my mind that Mrs. Markham would desert her post and leave the three children alone in the nursery; but I heard afterward that this was the case. An old Indian friend had called, and Mrs. Markham had desired Rolf to summon Hannah from the night nursery; but Rolf, who was seldom obedient to his mother, had simply ignored the order.

I was some little time in the housekeeper's room. The kettle did not boil, and I was compelled to wait. I was rather impatient at the delay. As I stood talking to Mrs. Rumble I saw Mr. Hawtry ride up to the front door.

I succeeded at last in making the poultices. Judson was very grateful to me, and thanked me warmly as I put them on. I had just covered her over comfortably, and taken from her the red woolen shawl in which she had wrapped herself, when a sudden report, as though from a toy cannon, and then a piercing scream from the nursery, made me start as though I had been shot, for the scream was from Joyce.

The next instant I was in the nursery; but, oh, merciful heavens! the sight that met my eyes. Hannah had just opened the door. Rolf and Joyce were huddled together on the window-seat, beside themselves with terror, and there stood Reggie in the middle of the room, with his pinafore and white frock in flames! I must have uttered a scream that roused the house, and then it seemed to me as though I knew nothing, and felt nothing except the smarting pains in my arm and shoulder. I had thrown the child on the floor and covered him with my body, and the woolen shawl was between us, and I was crushing the dear life almost out of him with that terrible pressure.

I seemed to know instinctively that nothing else could save him. Happily, I wore a stuff dress, for there was no rug or carpet in the nursery, and, with the open door and windows, another moment would have been too late. I

could hear Reggie's piteous cries, but I dare not release him; I must crush and smother the flames. There was the terrible smell of burning, the singeing of stuff, a sudden uproar round me, confused voices and exclamations. I seemed to hear Gay's voice crying, "Oh, Merle! you will smother the child!" And then strong arms lifted me off Reggie. I knew it was Mr. Hawtry; no one else could have done it. His grasp gave me intense agony, and I tried to free myself.

"Let me go! I must see if he is hurt." But Gay had him already in her lap, and I knelt down beside her and examined him carefully.

His frock and pinafore were hanging in blackened shreds around him, but there was only a large hole burned in his flannel petticoat, and one of his dear little legs was scorched; not a curl of his hair was singed, and only one hand had sustained a slight injury. They said there were bruises on him that I had caused by my violence, but that was all, Mrs. Markham assured me; there were tears in her eyes, and her face was as white as death as she said it.

"The little fellow will soon be all right," observed Mr. Hawtry, kindly; "he has been frightened and hurt; that makes him cry so. But now it is time your wounds should be dressed, Miss Fenton."

I looked at him, as though I failed to comprehend his meaning, but he pointed to my arms with such a pitying expression on his face that I looked too. My sleeves were hanging in shreds like Reggie's frock, and there were large burns on each arm; my right shoulder felt painful, too; a faint, sickening sensation seemed creeping over me. I must have got my arms under him, or I should not have been so badly burned, and some of my hair was singed. When Gay touched me gently I shuddered with pain, and they all looked at me very gravely.

"We must have Doctor Staples, Roger," observed Mrs. Markham; "her arms must be properly dressed."

"I will go for him at once," returned Mr. Hawtry, "but I advise you to give her a little wine or brandy: she looks faint with pain." And then he went away, and we could hear him galloping down the avenue and along the road.

I drank what they gave me, but I refused to lie down until Reggie had been undressed. I would not be persuaded without the evidence of my own eyes that he had sustained no serious injury. I suppose his scorched leg pained him, for he still cried incessantly, and beat us off in his usual fashion; but when Hannah had dressed him in his nice clean frock, he grew pacified at the sight of his blue ribbons, and only said, "Poor, poor," as he pointed to me. He wanted to come on my lap, but when I tried to take him I turned so faint that Gay looked frightened and snatched him away.

I wanted to know what had become of Rolf, but Mrs. Markham said, sternly, and her lips were still very pale, that she had sent him to his room: "Tell me how it happened, Joyce," she continued, drawing the child to her. "I told Rolf to fetch Hannah; did she not come to you?"

"Rolf didn't fetch her, Aunt Adda; he said he was a big boy, and would take care of us. Poor Rolf did not mean to be naughty, did he, nurse?"

"He must be severely punished for his disobedience, he has nearly killed your little brother, Joyce. Tell me what Rolf did after that."

"He asked me if I would not like to see his dear little cannon that went pop when he told it," went on Joyce, looking extremely frightened. "I did not know cannons were wicked things, and I said yes; and Rolf showed us the cannon, and told us to get out of the way, for it would kill us dead, and I runned, and baby clapped his hands and runned the wrong way, and Rolf had fire in his hand, like Hannah lights the candles with, and baby's pinafore got on fire, and I screamed as hard as I could for nurse."

It must have been just as Joyce said, for the toy cannon was on the floor, and a box of matches beside it. Probably Rolf had not seen Reggie beside him, and had thrown the lighted match aside in his excitement. Mrs. Markham sighed deeply as she listened. She had sustained a severe shock; her face looked very dark and rigid as she left the room. I was afraid she meant to punish Rolf severely, and begged Gay to follow her and plead for mercy.

"Rolf has had a fright that will last him for life; his terror has been punishment enough." But Gay shook her head.

"It is no use interfering with Adelaide; she will take her own way. I am sorry for Rolf; but he deserves any punishment he gets. Reggie would have been burned to death but for your presence of mind, Merle; none of us could have reached the nursery in time. Mr. Hawtry said so at once."

Reggie burned to death! and then my mistress would have died, too; she could not have survived the horror of that shock. I begged Gay faintly not to say such things; the bare mention of it turned me sick. I suppose she was alarmed by my ghastly look, for she kissed me, and said, soothingly, that I must not distress myself so; we could only be thankful that Reggie was safe.

Dr. Staples came soon after that. He was a benevolent-looking old man, and was very kind and gentle. He said one of my arms, the left one, was severely burned, and that it would be some little time before it was healed. "These things depend a great deal on the constitution; but you seem strong and healthy, Miss Fenton, so I hope you will soon be right again; but you must not expect to lose the scars."

I was sorry to hear that, for I knew the scars would remind me of a terrible hour in my life. The dressing was very painful, and when it was finished I was compelled to follow Dr. Staples's advice and go to bed. I was suffering

from the shock, and I knew my arms would be useless to me for a week to come. I felt shaken and sick, and unable to bear the childish voices.

Gay followed me into the night nursery, and gave me all the help she could, and she did not leave me until my head was on the lavender-scented pillow. In spite of pain and dizziness, it was nice to lie there and hear the birds twittering under the eaves and the bees humming about the flowers, and to look out on the sunshine and feel a great mercy had been vouchsafed to me, that I had not been suffered to fail in the hour of peril.

Gay hung up her cage of canaries in the window, to divert my mind, and laid a bunch of dark clove carnations, with a late rose or two among them, on the quilt.

"Mr. Hawtry is still here, Merle; he is very anxious to know if you are in less pain, and whether there is anything he can do for you. He seems quite grieved because Doctor Staples says your arm is badly burned."

I sent a civil message of thanks to Mr. Hawtry, and then I detained Gay a moment.

"Miss Gay, you must write to Mr. Morton yourself. I have promised your sister to tell her everything; but it will shock her too much, and I think Mr. Morton should know first."

Gay looked distressed.

"Need we tell them, Merle? Violet is not at all well; Alick said so in his letter this morning. Scotland does not seem to suit her, and he thinks they will soon come home."

"And they have not been away a month yet," I observed, regretfully; "not more than three weeks and two days; and Mr. Morton is so fond of Scotland."

"Alick thinks more of Vi than deer-stalking. If she be not well, he will bring her home without a word of grumbling. In some respects Alick is a very good husband. Why need we say anything about the accident,

Merle? Reggie is scarcely hurt at all; his scorched leg will soon get right."

"It is not fair to keep anything from them. I promised I would tell everything; and my mistress must know I am invalided and can not do my duty."

"You need not fret about that," she returned, cheerfully. "Susan shall help Hannah, and I will be here as much as possible. I am a famous nurse. We will make Mrs. Rumble wait on Judson. Very well, Merle, I will write to Alick; but I would much rather not."

I had forgotten poor Judson, but I did not forget Rolf; I asked several times after him, but Gay had not seen him. Rolf was in disgrace, and a close prisoner to his room. He had had his dinner sent up to him; but Adelaide was lying down in her own room all the afternoon with a bad headache, and, as Rolf's communicated with hers, no one could visit him unperceived.

I wondered if Mrs. Markham's eyes were at last opened to the danger of Rolf's disobedience and her own faulty management. She was to blame as much as the child. She had given me her word to remain in the nursery, and no visitors should have tempted her from her post. It was no surprise to me to hear she was ill with worry; her conscience must have reproached her for her breach of trust. If Reggie had been killed, his death would have been owing to her carelessness. Later on in the evening, just as it was getting dusk, Gay came to me for a minute with a plate of fine fruit in her hand. They had tempted me all day long with delicacies, but I had felt too ill to eat. The fruit just suited me, for I was feverish with pain.

"Adelaide has just come down-stairs," she said, with a droll little laugh. "Mr. Rossiter had heard of the accident, and had dropped in to inquire, so father kept him to dinner. When Adelaide heard that, she came down as soon as possible; and there she sits, looking like a ghost, until Mr. Rossiter takes his departure."

"And Rolf?"

"Oh, I suppose Rolf is asleep," she returned, carelessly; and as she was evidently in a hurry to return to the drawing-room, I would not keep her; but as soon as she had closed the door a sudden idea came into my head. I would go and see Rolf myself; I was not easy about him. I knew his mother could be too severe even with her idolized boy on occasions, but I never could bear a child to be long unhappy. I rose very quietly, so as not to disturb the children, and threw on my dressing-gown. I was rather afraid my white face and bandaged arms would frighten Rolf, until I remembered it was dusk, and he could not see me distinctly.

Mrs. Markham's suite of rooms lay in the west corridor. I knew no one would be about; poor Judson was in bed; so I reached Rolf's room without interruption. I thought I heard him sobbing softly to himself as I opened the door. When I spoke to him, making my way through the summer twilight to his little bed, he started up and held out his arms.

"Oh, Fenny, is that really you, dear Fenny? Do come close and let me feel you. I have been thinking of such horrid things."

I told him gently that I was in great pain, and that he must not touch me, but that I would sit down for a little while beside him and talk to him.

"But I may hold your hand?" he pleaded. "Is your hand burned too, Fenny, or don't you like to touch me because I am such a wicked boy, as mother says, and very nearly killed poor little Reggie?"

My heart melted at his pitiful tone, and I stooped over him and kissed his hot face.

"You may hold my hand, Rolf dear, if you like; it is only my arms that are hurt; there, we are comfortable now. Tell me, have you had a very miserable day?"

"Oh, so miserable!" and there were tears in Rolf's

voice. "Mother has been so angry; she shut me up in this room, though it was such a fine day, and would not let any one speak to me; and I could not get her to answer, although I said over and over again that I was sorry, and would not have hurt Reggie for the world; he is such a dear little fellow, you know. Oh! I am so fond of him. But mother said no, she would not listen; I had disobeyed her, and nearly killed Reggie, and that Aunt Violet would never speak to me again."

"Oh, yes, she will, Rolf!"

"But if Reggie had been really burned, you know," and here Rolf shivered; his hand was quite cold, though his face was burning. He was a nervous, excitable child, and no doubt this long summer's day had been a martyrdom to him. He had conjured up all sorts of horrible fancies to haunt his dreams. Yes, he had been sufficiently punished, I was sure of that.

"Tell me how it happened, dear," I said, quietly.

"I was firing my cannon to please Joyce. I know mother told me never to take it in the nursery, and that she did not like my lighting it unless Judson had the match-box, but I forgot."

"Did you really forget, Rolf?"

"Yes, really, I did; I never do remember things, you know. I was only thinking how Joyce would scream when the cannon popped. I told them to get out of the way, only Reggie, poor little fellow! ran against me and knocked the match out of my hand—it was alight, you know—and then Joyce did scream, and—" but here Rolf buried his head in the pillow; the recollection was evidently too painful. "You will all hate me," he sobbed, "because I nearly killed Reggie—you and Aunt Violet; and I do love Aunt Violet, because she is so pretty."

"No one will hate you, my poor child; we are only sorry that the son of a brave soldier like Colonel Markham should be such a coward as to disobey his mother

Your mother told you to fetch Hannah. Did you forget that too, Rolf?"

"No," in a conscience-stricken voice, "I did not forget, Fenny; but I thought it would be fun to take care of the children."

"But it was disobedience, Rolf, just as much as your coming into the nursery at that time you took advantage of my absence first, and then of your mother's. I think a brave soldier like your father would call that cowardly. Now, I want you to listen to a story about the bravest boy of whom I ever heard." And as I stroked his rough head I told him the story of Casabianca and the burning ship.

CHAPTER XX.

ROLF'S PENITENCE.

From a child that story of Casabianca had fascinated me, and I could see it fascinated Rolf.

"How I do like that fellow Cassy—what do you call him?" he exclaimed, enthusiastically, when I had finished. "I call that plucky, and no mistake, to stick to the burning ship. What a brave man he would have made if he had lived!"

"Yes, indeed; but he lived long enough to do a man's work in the world—faithful until death. 'Faithful in little, faithful in much,' Rolf. Casabianca would never have disobeyed his mother, or thought he knew best, would he?"

"No, Fenny," in a contrite voice, and sidling up to me again.

"I am afraid you can never be a soldier, dear!"

"What do you mean?"—sitting up erect in bed, with his beautiful eyes quite glaring at me in the twilight. "I mean to be a soldier, I tell you, and use father's sword! I shall be Colonel Markham, too, one of these days, unless I am killed in battle."

"You can not be a soldier unless you learn to obey, Rolf; you can not rule your men until you have submitted to rule yourself. Officers are gentlemen, and gentlemen are never cowards; and I call it cowardly, Rolf—quite a mean trick—to creep into the nursery in my absence. Honor should have kept you from crossing the threshold."

Now Rolf could not endure to be called a coward, so he lost his temper, and, I am sorry to say, called me a nasty, spiteful old cat, "which you are, Fenny, you know you are, and a great deal worse!" And the next moment he had thrown a rough pair of arms round my neck, his penitence inflicting on me excruciating pain.

"There, there, never mind"—hugging me—"I don't mean it. You are a dear old thing, Fenny, and I mean to marry you when I grow up. You are such a plain young woman, as mother says, that no one else would ask you, so I will."

"Do you think I could marry a coward, Rolf?"

"There you go again"—in a vexed voice—"but I shall never be a coward any more; I mean to be a brave boy, like Cassy—what do you call him? I mean to mind mother, and not to forget; and I will throw my cannon into the sea to-morrow, though I am so fond of it, and Mr. Rossiter (Walter I call him, but he does not mind) gave it to me. It cost a lot—indeed, it did, Fenny—but, all the same, it shall be drownded dead."

"If thine eye offend thee, pluck it out." I think there was something very real in that childish sacrifice. It was his treasured plaything, but it had tempted him to disobedience; he would fling it away with both hands. How few of us repent in that way! *Mea culpa*, we say, but we hug our darling sin close to us; it is not, like Rolf's cannon, "drownded dead." Brave, poor little faulty Rolf, I begin to have better hopes of you!

So I kissed and comforted Rolf, and he clung to me quite affectionately. I asked him if he had said his pray-

ers, and he said no, he had been too unhappy, because no one would forgive him; so we said them together, and afterward we had a little more talk. I was just going to leave him when a light crossed the threshold, and there stood Mrs. Markham, with a lamp in her hand. She looked very ill and unhappy, and I am sure she had been shedding tears.

Rolf sprung up in bed. "Oh, mother, do forgive me!" he cried. "I am sure I have been miserable long enough. Fenny has been telling me about Cassy—you know the fellow; and I mean to be like him. I will drown my dear little cannon; and I will never, never, never disobey you again!"

I think Mrs. Markham was longing in her heart to forgive him. She had suffered as much as the child. She said nothing, but sat down on the bed and held out her arms, and Rolf nestled into them. She kissed him almost passionately, but a tear rolled down her face.

"I think you will break my heart one day, Rolf, as your—" She checked herself, and did not finish her sentence. Did she mean Rolf's father? Colonel Markham had been a brave officer, I knew, and had died in battle; but he had not made his wife happy.

"Oh, no, mother," returned Rolf; "I am going to be a brave man, like father, and fight for everybody. I mean to take care of you when you are an old, old woman. Won't that be nice? You won't mind my marrying Fenny when I am quite grown up, will you, mother? Because she is such an old dear—not really old, you know, but so nice."

Mrs. Markham smiled faintly at the boy's nonsense, but she looked at me pleasantly.

"Thank you for talking to Rolf, Miss Fenton, and helping him to be good. He is sorry, I think, and I hope this painful lesson will teach him to be less mischievous. But now you look very unfit to be up. You have done us all

good service to-day, and we are all extremely grateful. Let me help you back to your room."

I was very much astonished at this civility, but I declined her assistance, and wished Rolf good-night. I was still more surprised when she held out her hand.

"You must be careful of yourself, Miss Fenton, for my sister's sake," she said, so kindly that I could hardly believe it was Mrs. Markham's voice.

I marveled at her manner greatly as I retraced my steps to the night nursery. She was really grateful to me, I could see that. Probably she realized that my prompt action had saved her and her boy a life-time of regret. To extinguish life accidentally must be a bitter and sore retrospect to any human mind. Rolf's boyhood would have been shadowed if his little cousin's death had laid at his door.

I tried to cheer myself with these thoughts as I laid awake through the greater part of that long summer's night. I could only sleep by snatches, and my dreams were full of pain. I imagined myself a martyr at Smithfield, and that the fagots were lighted about my feet. I could see the flames curling up round me, and feel their scorching breath on my fate. Excruciating pain seemed to tingle in my veins; I cried out and woke Joyce, and then the misery of my burns kept me restless. I was quite ill the next day, and could not stir from my bed; but Mrs. Markham and Rolf came to see me more than once, and Reggie played on my bed, and was so dear and good, and Joyce kept creeping up to me to know what she could do for nurse, and every two or three hours Gay's bright face seemed to bring sunshine into the room.

She had always some pleasant thing to tell me: a kind inquiry from Mr. Hawtry, and some flowers and fruit that Mrs. Cornish had arranged; a book from the vicar's wife, who had been very shocked to hear of the accident, and thought I wanted amusement; a message from Squire

Cheriton, with a basket of fine yellow plums that he had picked himself; and, later in the evening, a tin of cream and some new-laid eggs from Wheeler's Farm, that Molly had brought herself.

I begged to see Molly, and she came up at once, looking very respectable in her Sunday gown and straw bonnet crossed with yellow ribbons. She shook hands heartily until I winced with pain, and then begged my pardon for her carelessness.

"Thank you so much for your delicious present, Molly," I said, gratefully.

"Oh, please don't mention it, Miss Fenton; it is pleasure to me and father to send it, and father's duty; and there is a chicken fattening that will be all ready for eating on Thursday; and there is a pot or two of cherry jam that I shall take the liberty to send with it. It is just for the children and yourself, as I shall tell Mrs. Rumble."

"Every one is far too good to me," I stammered, and the tears came into my eyes; for the old squire and Gay had been so kind, and there were all those beautiful flowers and fruit from the Red Farm, and now this good creature was overwhelming me with homely delicacies. Molly patted me with her rough hand, as though I had been a child, and then kissed me in her hearty way.

"There, there, poor dear; who could help being good to you, seeing you lie there as helpless as a baby, with your poor arms all done up in cotton wool, and the pain hard to bear? Never mind, the Lord will help you to bear it; and He knows what pain means." And with this homely consolation Molly left me and went in search of Hannah.

When Gay came to me to see I was all comfortable for the night, I asked her rather anxiously if she expected to hear from Mrs. Morton in the morning.

She looked as though she were sorry I had asked the question. "Well, no — the fact is, I wrote the letter, Merle, but father forgot to post it, and it has not gone

yet. I am very sorry," as I uttered an exclamation of annoyance, "but it can not be helped, and it was all father's fault; he is so careless with letters; but now Adelaide has written to say how well Reggie seems to-day, and both of them shall go by the same post to-morrow morning. Benson shall take them."

It was no use saying any more. Gay was sorry, and it was not her fault, so I only asked her to add a word or two to explain the delay, and this she promised to do. She wanted to write to Aunt Agatha as well, but I would not hear of this. Aunt Agatha was very tender-hearted, and could not bear to hear of any suffering that she could not remedy, and I could see no benefit in harrowing her feelings. I would tell her myself one day.

Dr. Staples had given me a sedative, so I slept more that night, but it was three days before I could leave my bed, and all that time we heard nothing of my mistress. On the fourth day I put on a dressing-gown Gay lent me, with loose hanging sleeves, for my arms were still swathed like mummies, but the pain had lessened; and though I was weak enough only to lean back in an easy-chair and watch the children at their play, I liked to be with them, and it was pleasant to sit by the nursery window and look out on the terrace and sun-dial and the sunny orchard, with the old white pony grazing as usual.

Gay had come up that morning with rather a troubled face. They had had a letter from Alick, she said, but he had not received either hers or Adelaide's. Violet had seemed so ill that he had taken her home to Prince's Gate, that Dr. Myrtle might see her. They had left Abergeldie before their letters had arrived, and he could not possibly receive them until the next morning, but of course they would be forwarded at once.

I was much distressed to hear that the letters had miscarried, and still more that my mistress was ill. It was dreary taking her back to that great empty house; but

then Dr. Myrtle understood her constitution, and would do her more good than a stranger. I begged Gay to tell me what was the matter, but she did not seem to know. It was a collapse, Alick had said, a sudden serious failure of strength; he had written very hurriedly, and seemed worried and anxious.

"I wish I need not have told you all this, Merle," she finished. "It has made you paler than you were before. Violet has never been strong since Reggie was born, but I do not see that there is any need for special anxiety. But though Gay insisted on taking a cheerful view of things, I could not bring my spirits to her level. I felt nervous and unaccountably depressed. I had not sufficiently recovered from the effects of the accident to bear the least suspense with equanimity. In spite of my efforts to be quiet and self-controlled, I grew restless and irritable; the least noise jarred on me; it was a relief when Hannah took the children out and I had the nursery to myself. My nervous fancies haunted my dreams that night, and I woke so unrefreshed that Gay scolded me for not getting better more quickly, and pretended to laugh at my dismal face when I heard there was no letter from Mr. Morton.

"It is nonsense your fretting about those letters, Merle," she said, in her brisk way. "Alick has them by this time, and we shall hear from him before evening. Do, pray, pull yourself together, and I will ask Doctor Staples if a drive will not do you good; your in-door life does not suit you."

I did not contradict her, but I felt there would be no drive for me that day; perfect quiet and rest were all I wanted, and I knew Dr. Staples would be of my opinion. The afternoon was showery, so the children played about the nursery. I did not admit Rolf, for his noisy ways would have been too much for me, but he was very good, and promised to stay with Judson if he might come to me a little in the evening.

I had gone into the night nursery to lie down for an hour when I heard footsteps coming down the passage. The next moment I heard Mr. Morton's voice speaking to Gay.

"You can go in and see the children, Alick," she said, "and I will join you directly, when Adelaide has finished with me;" and then Joyce called out "Fardie," and I could hear Reggie stumping across the floor.

I waited a few minutes before I made my appearance. Much as I longed to see Mr. Morton, I thought he would rather meet his children alone. I almost felt as though I intruded when I opened the door. Hannah was not there, and he was sitting in my rocking-chair with Reggie in his arms, and his head was bowed down on the little fellow's shoulder. He started up when he heard me, but I never saw him look so pale and agitated. I knew then that he was a man of strong feelings, that his children were more to him than I had dreamed.

"Miss Fenton," he began, and then he bit his lips and turned away to the window. I saw he could hardly speak, and there was Reggie patting his face and calling "Fada, fada," to make him smile.

"Reggie is quite well," I said, feeling the silence awkward.

"Yes, yes," quite abruptly, "I see he is; thank God for that mercy; but, Miss Fenton, you have suffered in his stead. You are looking ill, unlike yourself. What am I to say to you? How am I to thank you?"

"Please do not say anything to me," I returned, on the verge of crying. "Dear little Reggie is all right, and I am only too thankful. Tell me about my mistress, Mr. Morton; we are all so anxious about her."

I thought he looked a little strangely at me. He held out his hand without speaking. That hearty grasp spoke volumes. Then he cleared his throat and said, quickly, "She does not know: I have not told her: she is very

weak and ill. Doctor Myrtle says we must take great care of her; she has been overexerting herself."

To my dismay and his I burst into tears, but I was not quite myself, liable to be upset by a word.

"Oh, she is always overexerting herself; she does more every day than her strength will allow," I cried, almost hysterically. "It makes one's heart ache to see her so worn out and yet so patient. Oh, Mr. Morton, do let me come home and nurse her; she is never happy without the children; it will do her good to see them; she frets after them too, and it makes her ill. Do let me come home; there is nothing I would not do for her."

I heard him beg me to be calm. I was ill myself, I heard him say, and no wonder; and he looked pityingly at my bandages.

"I only wish you could come back to us, Miss Fenton," he went on, so kindly that I was ashamed of giving way so. "The home feels very empty, and I think it would do my dear wife good to have the children's feet pattering overhead. She is too weak to have them with her just now, but it would be pleasant to know they were near."

I pleaded again that we might come home, and he smiled indulgently.

"You must get well first," he said, gently, "and then I will come and fetch you all back myself. Just now you require nursing, and are better where you are; and it is still hot in London, and the sea breezes will benefit the children a little longer. Come, you will be sensible about this, Miss Fenton."

And then, as Gay joined us, he turned to her and reiterated his opinion that I must stay at Marshlands until I was well.

Of course Gay agreed with him; but I thought she was a little graver than usual. I knew Mr. Morton was right. I was no use to any one just now; but, all the same, it made me feel very unhappy to see him go away and leave

us behind. He could not stay any longer, he said, for fear of arousing his wife's suspicions. He should just tell her he had run down to have a peep at the children; that would please her, he knew. He bade me good-bye very kindly, and told me to keep up my courage, and not lose heart. I could see he was not vexed with me for giving way. No doubt he attributed it all to weakness.

I sat down and had a good cry when he had left us, and there was no denying that I was homesick that night, and wanted Aunt Agatha. I felt a poor creature in my own estimation. Perhaps I was impatient: Dr. Staples told me I was, and his eyes twinkled as he said it; but it seemed to me I recovered very slowly. The burns were healing nicely; in a few more days I could put on my dress and enjoy the country drives; but I did not resume my usual duties for some time.

I could not dress and undress the children; walking tired me; and my spirits were sadly variable. The news from Prince's Gate did not cheer me: my mistress continued in the same unsatisfactory state. Mr. Morton wrote every day, and both Mrs. Markham and Gay had gone up to town for a few hours. I heard more from Mrs. Markham than from Gay. She thought her sister looking very ill, and considered there was grave cause for anxiety. She had an excellent nurse, and her husband was most devoted in his attentions; she had never seen any one to equal him. Here Mrs. Markham sighed; but her sister looked dull and depressed, and she thought she missed the children.

The bright September days passed away very slowly. I was growing weary of my banishment; and yet Marshlands and Netherton had become very dear to me, and I had grown to love the quaint old nursery. I was thankful when my strength permitted me to resume our mornings on the beach and our afternoons in the orchard. I felt less restless out-of-doors, and I liked to have Rolf with me.

I saw very little of Gay; just then she was busy with parish work. I heard from her casually one day that Mr. Hawtry had gone to Italy. I suppose I looked astonished, for she said, quickly:

"He called the other afternoon and asked to see the children, but Adelaide had taken you all for a drive. I thought he seemed a little sorry not to say good-bye to them, as he expected to be away some time. He hoped you were better, Merle, and desired his kind regards."

"And he has gone to Italy?"

"Yes; a young cousin of his is lying dangerously ill at Venice, and so this Don Quixote has started off to see after him. It is just like him; he is always doing things for other people." And with this speech she left me.

I was sorry not to say good-bye to Mr. Hawtry; he had been very kind to us, and it seemed such a pity that we had missed him that afternoon. I often thought about our visit to the Red Farm, and how pleasant and hospitable he had been. It seemed rather tantalizing just to make friends (and he had always been so friendly to me), and then not to see them again; but perhaps next summer we should come down to Marshlands again.

CHAPTER XXI.

BACK AT PRINCE'S GATE.

More than a fortnight had elapsed since Mr. Morton's visit, when one morning we received a telegram from him. He was coming down the next day to fetch us, and told us by what train we were to start.

Gay had quite a sorrowful expression on her face as she brought it up to me.

"You are really going, Merle, and I shall miss you dreadfully; it has been such a comfort to me to come up here and talk to you. You are such a sensible, comfort-

able sort of person, and I don't know what I shall do without you."

It was very nice to hear this, and to know people would miss me. Poor Rolf would, I knew, and he came up presently, looking glum and miserable.

"I wish I were going too, Fenny," he observed, feelingly. "If Aunt Violet were not so very ill, I should write to her and ask her to invite me. You will ask her yourself when she is better?" very coaxingly.

"We will see about that, Rolf dear. But just now I am very busy. Look at all those things to be packed."

"Yes, I know," regarding them carelessly. "And Hannah is in there, crying—because of leaving Molly, you know. You ought to cry at leaving me, Fenny."

"Well, I am sure, Master Rolf!" and I pretended not to see his lip was quivering.

"Don't laugh at me!" stamping his foot. "I can't bear it. I don't want you to go." And here followed a hug. "You were always so dreadfully nice, even mother says so now. It was worth being burned, to make mother say that, Fenny."

"I don't know about that, dear," remembering those weary nights of pain.

"Oh, yes, it was," he assured me, still holding me tight. "You would be burned over again to see me like Cassy—what do you call him?—that awfully jolly fellow, you know." And then, indeed, I felt a curious smart in my eyes as I kissed Rolf's forehead.

"You are right, dear; that would be worth any pain. Oh, Rolf, do try to be like him!"

"All right, Fenny," spoken very cheerfully; "you shall see." And then he stamped again, and broke into a whistle; but I knew what he meant, and that his little heart was full, and I held him very tightly for a moment, and whispered something that I thought he would like to

hear, and then he broke away from me, and I did not see him again for a long time.

I sent Hannah to Wheeler's Farm to spend her last evening with Molly. I knew Susan would help me, and I was not sorry to tire myself a little, for last hours are always somewhat trying, and though I was longing with all my heart to be back in the old nursery at Prince's Gate, I could not bid good-bye to Gay and Rolf and Marshlands without regret. But when I saw Mr. Morton's careworn face the next morning I forgot everything but my mistress; yet I thought that he answered my inquiries rather hastily.

She was better, Dr. Myrtle said, certainly better, but the improvement was not much as yet. He had been obliged to tell her about Reggie's accident; she had begged to have the children home, and nothing would satisfy her until she heard I was fit to travel. He had come for us the first day he could, because he knew how she wanted us. After this I was only anxious to start.

Gay accompanied us to the station, but Rolf bid me an affectionate good-bye on the terrace, in the presence of his mother and the squire. I think she seemed touched at his trouble, for she put her arm round him, and kept him close to her as she bid me a kindly adieu.

Squire Cheriton shook hands with me, and I saw Susan hovering in the background behind Mrs. Rumble, and looking as though she was sorry too.

I looked back regretfully at the old red-brick house. There was the peacock on the sun-dial as usual, and Rolf shading his eyes on the sunny terrace, and the old white pony looking at us over the gate, the brown bees humming over the flower-beds; the reapers were in the golden cornfields across the lane, we could hear their voices coming to us; it all looked so quiet and peaceful, and we had passed such happy days there.

I could see Hannah was quietly crying behind Reggie.

It was bad for her, poor girl, to say good-bye to her father and Molly, not to mention Luke Armstrong; and I was very glad, for her sake, when we reached the Netherton Station, to see Molly's homely features under her white sun-bonnet as she stood waiting for us in the road, with red-headed Dan beside her.

She grasped my hand cordially.

"You are looking more yourself, Miss Fenton; I am kindly glad to see that. Father will be fine and proud to see you next year at Wheeler's Farm. Why, Hannah, lass, hast been crying? Hold your head up, girl, and look it in the face. Luke is worth waiting for, if he is worth having at all; only young folks are so mighty hasty. There, the lad has sent you this bit of a posy, and Dan there has a young linnet for Miss Fenton to train. I have made so bold as to put in a basket with cream and eggs, and a bottle of elderberry wine. Nay, no thanks; Hannah's friends are our friends. Good-bye, and a pleasant journey." And the good creature wrung our hands, and dragged reluctant Dan away.

Gay's good-bye followed.

"We shall meet again soon, Merle; it will not be good-bye for long. I am coming up to stay with Violet before Christmas, and then we shall have some nice times together." Then she kissed the children, waved her hand gayly as the train moved down the platform, and the pretty smiling face disappeared from our view.

Mr. Morton was very silent during the journey. He had Joyce beside him, and now and then he spoke to her, but his face wore a gloomy, absent expression; he seemed troubled and ill at ease, and I remembered a speech of Gay's, "that Alick never seemed the same man when anything was the matter with Violet."

It was still early in the afternoon when we drove up Exhibition Road. Down at Netherton the golden blades of corn were falling beneath the reaping machine, the waves

were washing up against the beach, and the children were out picking flowers in the long, scented lanes. Now, instead of fresh, salt breezes, a fine eddying dust blew in our faces, carriages and cabs jostled each other in the sunny road, crowds of people, making their way to the museum or art-gallery or exhibition, blocked up the wide pavements. There were the gutter merchants driving their noisy trade, itinerant fruit-sellers, and flower-girls vaunting stale and withered wares, dusty plebeians glancing critically at the grand patrician houses, most of them still closed and shuttered. Dives was still on Scottish moors, or in English country houses, or seeking health on the Engadine; but Lazarus still dwelt at his closed gates, and displayed his festering sores to the careless passers-by.

I watched it all mechanically, but far different pictures rose to my recollection unbidden: the gnarled old apple-trees in the orchard at Marshlands, with the bench on which more than one generation of children had carved their names; Wheeler's Farm, with its trough set under the mossy pear-tree, and Molly, in her sun-bonnet, feeding her poultry; then, a red-brick house, with a stone porch, that sheltered us from the driving rain. There was a privet hedge, and a walnut-tree, and an old-fashioned bowling-green in that last picture; reminiscences of a disused room, with a blue couch, and a faint smell of rose *pourri*.

"Here we are, Miss Fenton," observed Mr. Morton, briskly; and I started and shook off these recollections hastily. Was I in a day-dream, I wonder? There was the open hall door, and Anderson's grave, imperturbable face, and Travers behind him with a message from her mistress to Mr. Morton that he should go up to her at once.

I do not think Hannah was half so pleased as I was to see the old nursery again; it looked brighter and larger than ever this afternoon after the low-ceiled room at Marshlands. The canaries were singing their loudest; the

Persian kitten came up to us, purring a welcome; Snap was as fussy with joy as possible, and licked us indiscriminately; there were fresh flowers on the table, a new, softly cushioned chair by the window, and a letter from Aunt Agatha on the little table beside it.

I could not help sitting down to read it at once, for I felt it would be such a sweet welcome home. It was more than that, however; it told me something which surprised me greatly. Mr. Morton had called himself the previous day, and had told Aunt Agatha all about Reggie's accident. No doubt he had expressed himself very kindly, else why should Aunt Agatha be praising me in that way? The tears came to my eyes as I read those loving sentences. "Come to me as soon as you can, dear child," it finished. "I shall not be quite happy or comfortable until I have seen you and talked it all over. Your uncle is as proud of you as I am. He said just now, 'I always thought that girl had plenty of pluck.' You know that was high praise from him."

I needed Aunt Agatha's letter to cheer me that evening, for I was not allowed to see my mistress. Mr. Morton came up himself to fetch the children, and then he told me that I must wait until the morning. "We must not excite her, and the children will be enough for to-day," he said; and no doubt he was right. Travers told me afterward that she had cried a great deal on first seeing Reggie.

But the next morning Travers came to fetch me. Mrs. Morton was in her dressing-room. It was a large, luxuriously furnished apartment, and had evidently been fitted up with much care, and as it was at the back of the house, and the windows overlooked the public garden, it was quiet enough to suit an invalid.

But my heart sunk when I first saw my mistress; she was not less beautiful, but her beauty had assumed a new character. Her face was pinched and thin, and there was a sunken look about the eyes; but when she stretched out

her hands to me with her old lovely smile, I had not a word to say.

"Sit there where I can see you, Merle," she said, in a weak voice. "Ah, there are tears in your eyes; but indeed you need not be unhappy about me now. I have been very, very ill, but I think God means to spare me to my husband and children." But I could not control my voice enough to answer; one look had been enough to tell me that she had been a few steps at least down the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

"You are all too anxious about me," she went on. "My dear husband has almost fretted himself ill. We can not tell for some months how it may be with me, but I am not afraid; I have only to be very patient, and lie still, you know; that is no punishment to me. I am always so lazy and tired."

She tried to speak with her old playfulness, but failed.

"Ah," she said, and now her voice trembled, "you have saved my life as well as Reggie's. I could not have borne to lose another child just now; I was too weak for that. No, I am not going to thank you, Merle; I have no words at all. If I live—and I think I shall—you will see what I feel, you will understand it then."

I asked her not to say any more, but she begged to see my scars. It was not easy to refuse her anything, but I was sorry such a thing entered her thoughts; but she looked at them very calmly.

"Yes, you have suffered instead of my child. I shall never forget that, neither will Alick. It has pulled you down, Merle; you have lost your rosy looks. What will Mrs. Keith say? You must go to her to-morrow; Mrs. Garnett will look after Reggie."

It was her old thoughtfulness for me, and I showed her I was grateful, and then I talked to her a little about Marshlands. I told her how fond I was of Gay, how good

and unselfish I thought her, and how much I cared for Rolf.

"Mrs. Markham is quite changed to me," I finished; "she is perfectly kind in her manner."

"Yes, I know, Merle; Adelaide is very grateful to you, and no wonder. She tells me she has made a mistake; that you are different from what she thought. That is a good deal for Adelaide to say; it is difficult for her to like people. Still—but do go on about Netherton; I do love to hear about my old home."

I could see she was cheered and interested, so I told her about our visit to the Red Farm. She seemed quite pleased at that.

"We are all so fond of Roger," she said; "Mr. Hawtry, I mean; but, you know, we were playfellows as children. He was so devoted to his sister Agnes; I never knew such a brother; but he is good in everything."

It could not have been my mistress's manner, for she was always so simple and unconscious, and she was one of those rare women who treat all such matters as sacred; but all at once the idea flashed into my mind that perhaps this was why Mr. Hawtry was unmarried.. What put such a thought into my mind I never knew; these sudden intuitions are baffling; but there it was, startling me with its verisimilitude of truth—that in the old days, when Violet Cheriton was young, Mr. Hawtry must have cared for her.

I knew afterward, when much was made clear to me, that such was the case, but that he had never told her so; he had waited and hoped, until Alick Morton found his way to Marshlands. If he had suffered, no one knew it; his manhood had strength enough to bear disappointment without growing sour over it; pain well borne brings its own healing, and so it was in his case.

Perhaps Mrs. Morton wondered a little over my silence, for she said nothing more about Mr. Hawtry, and I went on to tell her about Wheeler's Farm and Molly, until the

nurse came in and said my mistress had talked enough, and then she dismissed me very kindly.

Later on in the day I was summoned to Mr. Morton's library. I was rather surprised at this, until I remembered that Hannah was always in the nursery, and that probably he wished to speak to me alone.

I found this was the case.

He was busy writing when I entered, and he begged me to sit down for a moment until he had finished. I thought he looked a little more cheerful, and his face had lost that worried, anxious expression.

Presently he turned to me with a smile.

"Now for a chat, Miss Fenton. Do you know, Doctor Myrtle thinks my wife decidedly better to-day; the children have done her good, and she says she has enjoyed her talk with you. Doctor Myrtle particularly wishes her to be kept happy and amused. We have all pulled such long faces lately, and of course it has done her harm. Now you seem to suit her—you always have, you know; and I can not help thinking that it would be a good thing for her if you could sit with her sometimes, and bring Joyce or Reggie. That would be cheerful for her, eh, Miss Fenton?"

"It could easily be managed," I returned, with alacrity, for this idea pleased me greatly. "In the morning the children go out, but I could bring them down by turns in the afternoon, and leave the other child in Hannah's charge. I am sure it would do Mrs. Morton good to see Reggie playing about the room, and Joyce will be quiet for hours with her doll or pencil."

"Let it be tried, then, regularly, and I will give my orders to nurse," he said, in his quick, business-like way. Then all at once he stopped and looked at me inquiringly.

"What did you think of my wife this morning, Miss Fenton?"

I told him that I thought her looking extremely ill, and that for a long time her delicacy had alarmed me.

"You have not seen—she would not let you see, I mean," correcting myself, "how greatly she has overtaxed her strength; she has been failing over her day's work some time, and this illness is the result."

"That is true," he returned, in a low voice, and then he looked up in his keen way.

"Do you know this for a certainty? Has she ever complained to you, Miss Fenton?"

"Not in the way you mean," I replied, eagerly. "My mistress never complains, she is far too patient for that, but she has let me see plainly that so much gayety wearies her, that she feels far too tired to go out night after night. I am sure a quieter life, spent more with her children, would be better for her health."

I was half afraid I had said too much, as I saw him knit his brow and his face grow dark with anxiety.

"Oh, but that is impossible," he said, quickly, almost impatiently. "In our position a quiet life is impossible. There are social duties that must be done; you must see that for yourself, Miss Fenton. I would gladly insure rest for my wife if I could, but I must see what is to be done."

I saw that he meant to dismiss me, but I lingered for a moment. I was afraid he was displeased with me, but when I hinted this he looked at me quite astonished.

"Oh, no, I am not at all put out by what you said; I am only busy; and of course my wife's illness is a great anxiety. On the contrary, I thank you for your kind interest. It is quite true what you said—I see it for myself; but I can not decide what is to be done." And then I left the room, feeling easier in my mind. I could not have borne to pain Mr. Morton; my respect and liking for him had increased very much since my first acquaintance with him. No, he was blind no longer; but, as he said himself, in his position a quiet life was almost an impossibility.

But I was yet to learn that a strong will can achieve what is well-nigh impossible, and that when Alick Morton

had set himself to solve the problem of his wife's overtaxed life he would probably not be unsuccessful; but first he must nurse her back to health.

I put off my visit to Aunt Agatha for some days, that we might try Mr. Morton's experiment, and every afternoon I took my work and sat in my mistress's dressing-room, often until evening, while Joyce played with her dolls beside her mother's couch, or Reggie trotted about the room on numberless baby errands, learning new words every day, and rehearsing them proudly.

Mr. Morton would snatch a minute to look in upon us, and satisfy himself that his wife was not overfatigued.

I think he must often have gone away with a lighter heart when she looked up at him with her eyes shining with happiness, and a tinge of color in her face.

"Our son is growing quite a big boy, Alick," she would say, as Reggie stumped up to them with a headless doll in his arms, and she had always some little speech or anecdote to relate, to which he would listen patiently. She might talk about the children as much as she liked, but when she spoke to him of his work he would refuse to answer.

"Never mind my work, Violet," I heard him say once. "I want my wife down-stairs again; that is a subject closer to my heart." And I believed him. No work, no ambition could have replaced her; with all his faults, she was the dearest thing in life to him.

I think all this made her very happy, for there was always such a contented look on her face; so no wonder she grew better and stronger.

"I think illness teaches one to value one's blessings more," she said to me one Sunday evening, when the children were in bed, and I was still sitting with her. "I am afraid I have been very discontented, and have wanted my own way about things. I used to long for a quiet country life." No, I never said so," as I seemed inclined to interrupt her, "but the wish grew almost morbid. Perhaps

my long rest has done me good, but I do not feel a bit afraid now; I don't think I shall feel so tired over it again. I see it is the place Providence has intended for me, and by and by I shall have a longer rest still."

I saw what she meant; life was strong within her, and she did not believe she should die; she was only girding herself for the daily struggle, making up her mind to fill her place nobly. But I knew she had no cause to dread the future; her husband's strong arm would interpose between her and any great difficulties; she would not sink again because her day's work was too heavy for her.

CHAPTER XXII.

UNCLE KEITH.

I HAD been obliged to defer my visit to Aunt Agatha for more than a fortnight, and it was not until an early day in October that I could find a leisure afternoon. I believe that only very busy and hard-worked people really enjoy a holiday — listless and half-occupied lives know nothing of the real holiday feeling and the joyousness of putting one's work aside for a few hours of complete idleness.

I felt almost as buoyant and light-hearted as a child when I caught sight of the old bridge and the gray towers of All Saints. The river looked blue and clear in the October sunshine; there were barges floating idly down the stream; a small steamer had just started from the tiny pier; two or three clumsy-looking boats with heavy brown sails were moored to the shore; there was a man in a red cap in one of the boats; two or three bare-legged urchins were wading in the water. There was a line of purple shadow in the distance, little sparkles of sunlight everywhere, yellow and red leaves fluttering, a little skiff with a man in white flannel coming rapidly into sight, omnibuses, cabs, heavy wagons clattering over the bridge. Beyond

the white arches of the new bridge the busy hum of workers, the heaving of great cranes, the toil and strain of human activity.

The sight always fascinated me, and I stood aside with others to watch until a well-known figure in the distance recalled me with a start. Surely that was Aunt Agatha crossing the road by the bridge; no one else walked in that way—that quick, straightforward walk, that never seemed to linger or hesitate, that could only belong to her. Yes, it was she, for there was the dear woman holding out her hands to me, with the old kind smile breaking over her face.

"I came to meet you, Merle; I did not want to lose one minute of your company, but I was a little late after all, dear child. What a stranger you are, all these months that we have not met!"

"It has seemed a long time to me, Aunt Agatha; so much seems to have happened since I was last here."

"You may well say so," she returned, gravely; "we have both much for which to be thankful. Your accident, Merle, which might have had such grave results, and—" here she checked herself, but something in her manner seemed strange to me.

"We need not walk quite so fast, surely," I remonstrated. "How these people jostle one! and I want to talk to you so."

"And I to you. Never mind, we shall find a quiet corner under the shadow of St. Mary's." And as she spoke we turned into the narrow flagged path skirting the church, with the tombs and gray old head-stones gleaming here and there. There were fewer people here.

"Are you sure you are quite well?" I began, rather anxiously. "You are looking paler than usual, Aunt Agatha, and, if it be not my fancy, a little thinner."

"Yes, and older, and perhaps a trifle graver," she returned, rather bris[illegible] I thought her cheerfulness a

little forced. "We have not yet learned how to grow younger, child. Well, if you must know—and this is why I came to meet you, that we might have our little talk together—I have not been without my troubles; your uncle has been very ill, Merle, so ill that, at one time, I feared I might lose him; but Providence has been good to me and spared my dear husband." And here Aunt Agatha's voice trembled and her eyes grew misty.

I was almost too shocked to answer; but my first words were to reproach her for keeping me in ignorance.

"You must not blame me, Merle," she replied, gently. "I wanted you dreadfully; I felt quite sore with the longing to see you, but I knew you could not come to me. Mrs. Morton was in Scotland; you were in sole charge of those children. Unless things grew worse I knew I had no right to summon you. Thank God, I was spared that necessity; the danger only lasted forty-eight hours; after that he only required all the nursing I could give him."

"Aunt Agatha, it was not right; you ought to have told me."

"I thought differently, Merle; I put myself in your place—you could not desert your post, and you would only have grown restless with the longing to come and help me—the same feeling that made you hide your accident from me led me to suppress my trouble. I should only have burdened your kind heart, Merle, and spoiled your present enjoyment. I said to myself, 'Let the child be happy; she will only fret herself into a fever to help me, and she must do her duty to her employers.' If Ezra had got worse I must have written; when he grew better I preferred telling you nothing until we met."

"I shall never trust you again!" I burst out, for this reticence wounded me sorely. "How am I to know if things are well with you if you are always keeping me in the dark?"

"If will not happen again, Merle; indeed, my dear, I

can promise you that it shall never happen. If you had been at Prince's Gate I should have summoned you at once, but, in your position, how could I ask you to desert your post, Merle, when those who placed you there were hundreds of miles away?"

I saw what she meant, and I could not deny that she had kept me in ignorance for my own peace of mind. It was just her unselfishness, for I knew how she must have longed for me; we were so much to each other, we were so sure of mutual sympathy and help. Aunt Agatha cried a little when she saw how hurt I was, and then, of course, I tried to comfort her, and I very soon succeeded. I never could bear to see her unhappy, and I knew it was only her goodness to me.

I begged her to tell me about Uncle Keith's illness, and she soon put me in possession of the salient points. He had worked a little too hard, and then had got wet in thunder-storm, and a sharp attack of inflammation had been the result.

"He considers himself well now," she continued, "but he is still very weak, and will not be able to resume work for another week or two. His employers have been very kind; they seem to value him highly. Oh! he has been so patient, Merle, it has been quite a privilege to nurse him; not a complaint, not an irritable word. I always knew he was a good man, but illness is such a test of character."

"But you have worn yourself out," I grumbled; "you do not look well." But she interrupted me.

"Do not notice my looks before your uncle," she said, pleadingly; "he is so anxious about me; but indeed I am only a little tired; I shall be better now I have told you and got it over. You have been on my mind, Merle, and then that horrid accident." But I would not let her dwell upon that. We had reached the cottage by this time, and Patience was watching for us; she looked prettier and rosier than ever.

I found Uncle Keith sitting pillowed up in an arm-chair by the drawing-room fire. I thought he looked shrunken, and there was a pinched look about his features. He had not grown younger and handsomer to my eyes, but as he turned his prominent brown eyes on me with a kind look of welcome, and held out his thin hand, I kissed him with real affection, and my eyes were a little wet.

"Hir-rumph, my dear, I am pleased to see you—there, there, never mind my stupid illness; I am quite a giant now, eh, Agatha? It is worth being ill, Merle, to be nursed by your aunt; oh, quite a luxury, I assure you! Hir-rumph." And here Uncle Keith cleared his throat in his usual fashion, and stirred the fire rather loudly, though he looked a little paler after the exercise.

"But I am so dreadfully sorry, Uncle Keith," I said, when Aunt Agatha had taken the poker from him and bustled out of the room to fetch him some jelly, "to think I never knew how ill you were."

"That was all the better, child," he returned, cheerfully. "Agatha was a wise woman not to tell you; but there are not many people in the world, Merle, who would come up to your aunt, not many," rubbing his hands together.

"No, indeed, Uncle Keith."

"How do you think she looks?" he continued, turning round rather sharply. "Have I tired her out, eh?"

"She looks a little tired, certainly."

"Hir-rumph, I thought so. Agatha, my dear," as she re-entered with the jelly, "I do not want all this waiting on now; it is my turn to wait on you! I must not wear out such a good wife, must I, Merle?" And though we both laughed at that, and Aunt Agatha pretended that he was only in fun, it was almost pathetic to see how he watched her busy movements about the room, and how he begged her again and again to sit down, and not tire herself; and yet she loved to do it. I think we both of us

knew that. I was not disposed to pity Aunt Agatha as I had done in former years. Perhaps I had grown older and more womanly in those eight months of service, and less disposed to be critical on quiet, matter-of-fact lives. On the contrary, I began to understand in a vague sort of way that Aunt Agatha was garnering in much happiness in her useful middle age, in her honest, single-eyed service. Love had come to her in a sober guise, and without pretension, but it was the right sort of love after all, no doubt. To youthful eyes, Uncle Keith was not more of a hero; but a plain honest man, even though he has a fewer inches than his fellows, may have merit enough to fill one woman's heart, and I ceased to wonder at Aunt Agatha's infatuation in believing herself a happy woman.

We had not much talk apart that day. Aunt Agatha could not leave Uncle Keith, but I never felt him less in the way. I talked quite openly about things; he was as much interested as Aunt Agatha in listening to my description of Marshlands and Wheeler's Farm, and had not a dissenting word when I praised Gay Cheriton in my old enthusiastic way, and only a soft "hir-rumph" interrupted my account of Reggie's accident.

It was Aunt Agatha who walked back with me over the bridge in the soft October twilight. Tired as she was, she refused to part with me until the last minute.

"You must come again soon, Merle," she said, as we parted; "Ezra and I are not young people now, and a bright face does us both good, and your face has grown a very bright one, Merle."

Was Aunt Agatha right, I wondered? Had I really grown happier outwardly? Had the inward peace of satisfied conscience and a heart at rest cast its reflection of brightness? I was certainly very happy just then; my life was growing wider, friends were coming round me, interests were thickening, there was meaning and purpose in each opening day. I no longer thought so much of myself

and my own feelings; the activities of life, the needs and joys of others, seemed to press and crush out all morbid ideas. I had so many to love, and so many who seemed to need me and care for me.

I went more than once to Putney during the next two or three weeks. My mistress was far too sympathizing and unselfish to keep me from my own people when they needed me; on the contrary, she was always full of contrivances that I should be spared.

November passed very pleasantly. Mrs. Morton was recovering strength slowly but surely; she was no longer a prisoner to her dressing-room, but could spend the greater part of the day in the drawing-room or in her husband's library.

But she still continued her invalid habits, and saw few people. I still sat with her in the afternoon, and either Joyce or Reggie played about the room. When Mr. Morton was absent I came down to her in the evening, and read or talked to her. I prized these hours, for in them I learned to know my sweet mistress more intimately and to love her more dearly.

At the beginning of December Gay came to us. I was looking forward to her visit with some eagerness, though I knew my evenings would then be spent in the nursery, as Mrs. Morton would only need her sister's society; but, to my great surprise, I was summoned to the drawing-room on the evening of her arrival. She had just come in time to dress for dinner, and we had not yet seen her. I could scarcely credit Travers's message when she delivered it.

"Will you please go down to the little drawing-room, Miss Fenton? Miss Gay wants to see you, and my mistress does not care to be left alone."

She started up and came to meet me with outstretched hands. She looked prettier than ever, and her eyes were shining with happiness.

"I am so glad to see you, Merle. I wanted to come up

to the nursery, but this spoiled woman—how you have all spoiled her!—refused to be left. She said Hannah would be there, and that we could not talk comfortably."

"Yes, but there was another reason," returned my mistress, smiling; and Gay blushed and cast down her eyes.

"I wanted to tell you the news myself, because I knew you would be interested. Sit down, Merle, in your usual place, and guess what has happened."

I did not need to guess; the first look at Gay's happy face had told me, and then I had glanced at a certain finger. Opals tell their own tales.

"Guess," continued my mistress, mischievously. "Who was the guest who came oftenest to Marshlands?"

"There were two who came most frequently," I returned, looking steadily into Gay's blushing face, "Mr. Hawtry and Mr. Rossiter; but I do not need to be told it is Mr. Rossiter." And Gay jumped up and kissed me in her impulsive way.

I could see that she was pleased I had guessed it.

"I told you it would be no news to her, Vi," she said, breathlessly. "Do you remember our talk in the orchard, Merle, when I told you I was afraid of poverty?"

"Yes; but I knew you magnified your fears, Miss Gay." But she shook her head at that.

"I hate it just as much as ever. I tell Walter I am the worst possible person for a poor man's wife, and if you ask Violet she will agree with me, but I was obliged to have him, poverty and all; he would not take 'No' for an answer."

"I think Walter was very sensible," returned her sister. "I should have despised him for giving you up."

"He would never have done that," replied Gay, with decision, "until I had married somebody else; and there was no chance of that. You are grave, Merle: do you mean to forbid the bans? Why do you not congratulate me?"

"I do congratulate you with all my heart. Will that content you?"

"To be sure; but what then, Merle?"

"I ought not to say, perhaps, if you have made up your mind. I like Mr. Rossiter. He is young, but he seems very good. But do you remember what I said to you that evening, Miss Gay, when we were watching the moon rise over Squire Hawtry's corn-fields—that your environment just suited you? I can't realize Marshlands without you."

I saw the sisters exchange a meaning look, and then Gay said, in a low voice: "What should you say, Merle, if I am not to leave Marshlands—if my father refuses to part with me?"

"I do not think that would answer. Mrs. Markham would be mistress, and you have told me so often that she does not like Mr. Rossiter."

"There are to be changes at Marshlands, Merle," broke in my mistress; she had been listening to us with much interest, and I wished Mr. Morton could have seen her with that bright, animated look on her face. "Adelaide will be mistress there no longer. A young cousin of ours, Mrs. Austin, who was with Adelaide in Calcutta, has just lost her husband. She is an invalid, is very rich, and very helpless, and has no one except ourselves belonging to her. She is very fond of Adelaide, and she has begged her to live with her, and superintend her establishment. She has a large house at Chislehurst, and so Adelaide, and Rolf, and Judson are to take up their abode with her."

"Things have not been very pleasant lately, Merle," observed Gay, gravely. "Adelaide has set her face against my marrying Walter, and she has worried father and tormented me, and made things rather difficult for all of us. It is quite true, as she says, that Walter is poor, and has no present prospects," continued Gay; "and she has dinned his poverty so incessantly into father's ear that he has got frightened about it, and has made up his mind

that he will not part with me at all—that Walter must make his home with us. There was a terrible scene when Adelaide heard this; she declared she would not stop in the house under these conditions. And then Amy's letter came, and she announced her resolution of living at Chislehurst. I do not like the idea of driving Addie away, but," finished Gay, with an odd little laugh, "I think father and I will manage very well without her."

We talked a little more on the subject until I was dismissed; and I had plenty of food for my thoughts when I went back to the quiet nursery.

CHAPTER XXIII.

RINGING THE CHANGES.

It pleased me greatly to hear that Gay would be mistress of Marshlands; I could not imagine the place without her bright presence. She would still have her pets around her, her bees and chickens, and her brown mare Bonnie; the tame pheasants would still follow her up and down the terrace, the pigeons fly on her arms and shoulders; she would ride out with the old squire, and sing to him of an evening, and Walter Rossiter would be a son to him in his old age. I thought it would be an ideal life, and I found out that my mistress thought so too.

She often talked to me about it when we were left alone, and of her young sister's happiness; and when Gay had a leisure hour she would run up to the nursery, and chat about her future, telling me everything she thought I should like to hear.

After a week or two Mr. Rossiter came to Prince's Gate, and then I saw little of Gay; my nursery duties occupied me, and she was too much engrossed with her lover's company to give me much of her time.

Mr. Rossiter had brought a sad piece of news with him that I was sorry to hear. Mr. Hawtry had returned from

Venice, bringing his cousin with him to the Red Farm; but a few days ago he had met with an accident in the hunting-field; his mare had thrown him in jumping a gate. It was a young mare he had lately bought, and she had not been properly broken in; the result had been a broken leg to her master. Gay could not quite tell me how it had happened. Mr. Hawtry was too good a horseman to be easily thrown, but he had fallen in an awkward place, and it was only by a miracle he had not been killed.

His cousin, Edgar Hawtry, was nursing him; but it was likely to be a tedious affair.

I noticed that Mrs. Morton and Gay seemed to take this accident greatly to heart; they were always alluding to it, and looking eagerly for bulletins from Marshlands. "There would be few men more missed than Hawtry," I heard Mr. Rossiter say one day, when he and Gay were in the nursery playing with the children. "I should not be here now if Edgar were not with him; but he is a famous nurse, Mrs. Cornish tells me."

I was glad to think that poor Mr. Hawtry was not left alone, to miss his mother and Miss Agnes. He was so strong and active, so full of life and energy, that we could not imagine him a prisoner to his couch. I had heard a great deal of this young artist cousin, whom he had nursed through a long and dangerous illness in Venice. He was a light-hearted, handsome young fellow, and I was glad to know that he was at the Red Farm taking care of Mr. Hawtry.

Mr. Rossiter and Gay left us a little before Christmas. Mr. Rossiter's duties recalled him to Netherton, and Gay could not well remain longer. Mrs. Markham was to accomplish her flitting with the New-year, and then Gay would assume her position as mistress of Marshlands.

She came to us again early in February to get her *trousseau*, and remained three weeks. Her wedding was fixed for the end of April. I saw a good deal of her dur-

ing those weeks. She would take us with her in the carriage sometimes when she went on her shopping expeditions; sometimes we helped her with her purchases, until Reggie grew restless and I carried him out.

She was very sweet and humble in her happiness, and would often tell me how little she deserved it. "Do we ever deserve it?" she said once, as we were driving through the park one late afternoon. Reggie had fallen asleep on my lap. Joyce sat opposite, looking at the twinkling gas-lamps and the pale radiance of distant water. Gay leaned back in her place a little wearily, but her eyes were shining in the dusk. "I do not think any of us deserve it, Merle; it is a free gift to all of us, for which we must be thankful."

"Yes," I returned, briefly, for I would not interrupt the solemnity of her mood by any ill-timed compliment; and yet, in my heart, I believed no one deserved happiness more. It would not be wasted on her, I knew that; she was one of those who receive with both hands, and then give it back again to others. I knew she and Walter Rossiter would lead noble lives together, doing their duty simply and without effort, not looking for large results, but carrying good seed with them and scattering it broadcast with no niggardly hand.

Theirs would be a bright, sunshiny home, I was quite sure of that—a home where generous hospitality would be exercised, where the poor as well as the rich would be feasted.

When Gay said presently in a moved tone, "How good I ought to be, and how happy I ought to make others when I am so blessed myself!" I knew she was speaking out of the very fullness of her young heart that was overflowing with happiness, and I thought how nice it was to hear her. I liked to see the simplicity with which she grasped the meaning of life—to be happy—yes, truly, for to that end we were created, and to benefit our fellow-creatures.

It was a little hard to say good-bye to her, but she comforted me with the assurance that she meant to have us all down at Marshlands that summer. Their honey-moon was to be a brief one, she told me; for neither she nor Mr. Rossiter liked to leave the squire long alone.

"We must not be selfish, Walter says," she finished, brightly; "and as he declares our honey-moon is to last for life, I do not see that it much matters where we spend it;" and then she gave a happy little laugh and went away.

It was a great disappointment to my mistress that neither she nor her husband could be at the wedding; but circumstances prevented it, for with the May sunshine another little human blossom appeared at Prince's Gate—a baby girl, to take the place of the dead Muriel.

I do not know why I shed tears when the baby was first laid in my arms. Perhaps I realized that my beloved mistress had lain long between life and death, and that to the household it had been a time of terrible suspense; but when I saw my mistress's pale face irradiated with the purest happiness the feeling passed.

"Alick has promised me that I may call her Florence," she whispered. "Is she not a lovely baby, Merle; more like Reggie than Joyce?" But she smiled when I assured her the baby resembled her.

The birth of little Florence made necessary changes in the household; it added another to the nursery. Reggie was now two and a half years old, and was growing a fine healthy boy, and I thought I was justified in pleading for the sole charge of the baby. But it was decided that the nurse, Mrs. Morris, a very pleasant, respectable woman, should remain for the next few months, and after that I should have my wish; Hannah could then be promoted to the care of Reggie, and an under-girl could be added if necessary. Hannah gave up her room to Mrs. Morris, and

took a smaller one that had been used by Rhoda, but I still kept possession of the night nursery.

I was little averse to Mrs. Morris's company at first, but after a time I grew reconciled to it. She was a sensible, well-educated woman, and could be more companionable to me than Hannah, and baby Florence was my delight.

From the first, she was more with me than with her proper nurse. Mrs. Morris pretended to grumble when I snatched her away on every possible occasion, but I could not resist the pretty cooing creature. I would have given up my night's rest gladly to watch over her. Even my mistress smiled when she paid her first visit to the nursery, and saw me in the rocking-chair with baby on my lap, and Mrs. Morris amusing Reggie at the window.

When she grew stronger she came daily to the nursery and sat with us for an hour or so. She told me once, when we were alone together—a very rare thing now—that her husband employed a secretary for two or three hours in the day, and that he no longer required her services.

"I was a little sorry at first," she confessed, "because I was afraid he would need me less, until he told me that he had done it for my sake. He thinks I ought to be more with the children, Merle; that Joyce should learn her first lessons from me. We have been arranging the day's duties. You have no idea how thoughtful he is for my comfort; he says I am not strong enough to lead such a busy life. The children are to be with me for an hour or two before luncheon, and I am only to devote my afternoons to people in general. He has refused all invitations this season, and at the begining of July he means to send us all down to Marshlands; it seems Gay insists on it."

I was pleased and thankful to hear this. I was looking forward to our visit to Marshlands with an intensity that surprised myself. It seemed almost too good to be true that my mistress would be with us. I longed to see the

young Mrs. Rossiter in her happiness, to revisit our old haunts, to spend our afternoons in the orchard, to go over to Wheeler's Farm and see Molly. Perhaps we might even revisit the Red Farm.

Mr. Hawtry had recovered from his accident. I knew that he had been away for change of air and scene with his cousin, and was back again at the Red Farm. He seemed to be frequently at Marshlands, for Gay always mentioned him in her letters. He was very busy as usual, making improvements on his farm and building more laborers' cottages. Luke Armstrong lived in one of them.

Hannah used to quote largely from Luke's letters, as we walked in Kensington Gardens in the bright June mornings. Sometimes it was about a piece of furniture Luke had picked up cheaply, an eight-day clock, or a chest of drawers, or a round table that would come in handy. Molly had been sending him some useful odds and ends out of the store-room at Wheeler's Farm—a brass fender and a Dutch oven, a striped red and black cloth, and some china cups and saucers that Hannah was "fine and proud of," as Molly said. Luke was forever hinting in a modest sort of way that the cottage was nearly furnished.

I had been helping Hannah with her sewing all the winter, and we knew the result would gladden Molly's heart. Hannah's savings had been invested wisely. The great painted box in Hannah's room held quite a store of sheets and table-linen, not to mention piles of neat garments all ready for use. I knew what all Luke's hints meant; both he and the cottage were ready for the young mistress, and in her simple, loving way Hannah was ready too. I wondered sometimes if Gay—young Mrs. Rossiter, I mean—had taken half so much pride and pleasure in her *trousseau* as Hannah did in the contents of that old painted box. I was quite aware that the gray French merino that had been her mistress's Christmas gift still lay there, wrapped in whitey-brown paper with the half dozen hem-stitched

handkerchiefs that had been my present, carefully hoarded for future use.

Hannah blushed a little guiltily when I asked her about the gray merino.

"It does not seem to matter what gowns I wear when Luke is not by to see them," she returned, simply; "I only care to be neat and clean, so I am saving all my pretty things until we are married. There is the blue print Molly sent me, and some collars and cuffs from Lydia lying there with the merino. Molly has promised me my wedding-dress," continued Hannah, bashfully. "We have talked of it already, though I have not made up my mind to wed just yet, for all the nonsense Luke talks. It is to be gray, too," she went on. "Luke has a fancy for gray gowns; and it is to have silky raised spots on the stuff, like Miss Gay's, only not so fine."

"Yes, indeed; but I dare say the stuff one will be just as pretty."

"Mother was married in a Japanese silk dress; Molly has a bit of it still in a work-bag; but Molly says she does not hold with silk dresses and silver spoons for working folk. There is Martin of Scroggins's Mill has promised Lyddy a gold watch and chain and a silk gown that will stand alone for richness, but Molly says Lyddy is far too sensible to be bought at that price."

"Indeed I hope so, for Lydia's own sake."

"Oh, there's no fear of Lyddy taking up with Martin," returned Hannah, confidently; "she is bound to be single like Molly. Folks can not all be mated, Molly says, and it is best to be content with a solitary lot than wed a fool. Molly never had much opinion of men-folk. She says they want a deal of waiting on, and are fine and helpless compared to women."

Molly's strong-minded views somewhat amused me, but she was certainly a tower of strength to her young sisters. One could not help sympathizing with Hannah's happi-

ness; she was so simple and honest; she had such faith in her lover's perfections; she so thoroughly believed in herself and him.

After a time I grew almost as much interested in the cottage arrangements as Hannah did. I was quite excited when Luke brought home a pig to inhabit the new sty by the kitchen-garden, and spoke of investing his next week's wages in a cock and some hens. I found Hannah nearly crying for joy one day over a letter from home. Molly had coaxed her father to spare the brindled cow as Hannah's marriage portion.

"Is it not good of Molly?" she cried, drying her eyes on her apron. "To think of my having Buttercup for my very own, and of the sweet new milk for Luke's porridge that she will give us every morning. It makes me cry with happiness, Miss Fenton, to think how proud Luke will be. Molly has been a mother to us girls ever since I can remember, and we have not been half good enough to her."

I grew a little wearied at last of Hannah's ecstasies over the brindled cow, though I reproached myself for selfishness; but to hear too much of other people's happiness without sharing it is rather like sitting before covered dishes at a feast, and hearing one's neighbors discourse on the separate flavors. Ah, me! what self-seeking humans we all are! I think it made me just a little restless to hear Hannah's talk, until baby cried, and I took her on my lap, and she looked at me with her pretty blue eyes, and began to coo, as she always did when I sung to her.

I had not been to Putney for some time, and it struck me that a cozy afternoon with Aunt Agatha would do me good. Perhaps it was the heat, but I certainly felt a little restless. We were to start for Netherton in another ten days, and I thought I could be more easily spared just now. I thought it would be nice to surprise Aunt Agatha

with an unexpected visit. When I told my mistress this she seemed amused.

"You had better let Mrs. Keith know beforehand, Merle. Suppose you were to find her out; that would be a serious disappointment to you both."

But I refused to entertain this objection; I had never found Aunt Agatha out yet.

"Very well, do as you like," she replied, pleasantly. "It is rather a hot afternoon; but I see you have made up your mind. You are just a little home-sick, Merle, and want a comfortable talk with your aunt. If your uncle could see you home, I have no objection to your remaining all the evening. Mrs. Morris will look after Reggie."

I shook my head over this proposition. Uncle Keith was very kind, but I could not trouble him to escort me. My mistress was very particular about this. She would never hear of my being out late alone.

"It is all very well for Hannah or Travers," she would say, "but in your case it is different." And, indeed, in many other ways she watched over me as though I were a young sister.

It was an intensely hot afternoon, and I was thankful to put on my coolest dress. It was rather a light-colored stuff, that Aunt Agatha had given me in the spring. Hannah and I had made it up with Travers's help; but though it was a very pretty gown, I thought it rather unsuitable for daily wear, and so I put it by for festive occasions. I always took particular pains with myself when I went home. I knew Aunt Agatha would eye me critically and would grumble if I looked dowdy or shabby. She was a woman who loved pretty things, and it was an unpardonable offense in her eyes for young persons to be negligent of their appearance.

"Depend upon it, Merle," she would say, "there is something unhealthy in a girl who professes not to care how she looks. It is our duty to make the best of our-

selves. A woman can not help being plain, but she need not shock our eyes by tastelessness or untidiness."

"I think I shall please Aunt Agatha this afternoon," I thought, as I looked at myself somewhat critically. The dress was pretty, so was the bonnet, though I had trimmed it myself.

I was in very good spirits as I left the house. It might have been cooler, certainly, and the second-class compartment felt unusually stuffy; but I forgot the heat when the river came in sight—it was so bright and sparkling in the sunlight.

The cranes were at work as usual, huge blocks of stone were quivering in the air, the white arches with their iron girders spanned the river, there was the usual noisy traffic in the High Street, the gray old churches stood like silent sentinels in the midst of hurry and toil, the clock chimed, then a bell tolled; "In the midst of life we are in death," it seemed to say; a funeral came over the bridge in the sunshine, some children stood gaping on the foot-way, a carriage passed it somewhat rapidly; the coachman had a satin favor. I wonder if the bride turned her head away from the sad sight?

Mrs. Morton's speech somewhat haunted me as I came up the narrow flagged way leading from the town. Suppose, after all, Aunt Agatha should be out; I knew I should be grievously disappointed. Perhaps, after all, it was foolish to chance it. I slackened my steps instinctively, as though I feared no welcome awaited me at the cottage. As I walked between the garden walls, with rose scents wafted to me every now and then, the shadeless sunshine oppressed me, the stones felt hot to my feet, and a cloud of dust whirled suddenly round the corner.

I really thought my apprehension was true when Uncle Keith opened the door; he looked so excessively surprised to see me; his manner, too, was rather confused.

"Hir-rumph, my dear!—this is a very unexpected pleas-

ure. Who would have thought of such a thing? Agatha will be delighted."

"Aunt Agatha is in, then?" I asked, eagerly.

"Oh, yes, she is in; but—hir-rumph—the fact is, my dear, she is engaged just at this moment. We did not know who it was, and she asked me to excuse her to any visitor. Shall we go into the dining-room for a few minutes until she is ready?"

"I would rather go upstairs and take off my bonnet, Uncle Keith," I returned, quickly; "it is so hot, and I shall be glad to get cool;" but he stood still on the mat, looking after me, and I heard him clearing his thoat more loudly than usual as he went back to the drawing-room.

I was glad to hear the front door shut presently, and ran down at once without looking to see who the mysterious stranger might be. If I had taken that trouble, I should have seen Uncle Keith, in his old felt hat and gingham umbrella, walking rapidly down the street, intent on some domestic business, and should hardly have burst into the room in that unceremonious fashion.

"Oh, Aunt Agatha!" I exclaimed, reproachfully, "why did you not come up to me?" and then I stood transfixed with astonishment. There was a tall gentleman standing by the window talking to Aunt Agatha, who turned round abruptly as I opened the door. It was Mr. Hawtry!

I suppose I must have looked very stupid, standing there, unable to speak in my surprise; for he certainly laughed as he came forward and shook hands with me, and yet he seemed a little nervous too.

"I see you do not believe your eyes, Miss Fenton, and yet it is really I myself, Roger Hawtry." And then he laughed again. Yes, I was sure he was nervous.

"My dear child, what good wind has blown you to us this afternoon?" exclaimed Aunt Agatha, putting her

arms round me. "I had no idea who the visitor was until Ezra told us just now."

"It was Uncle Keith then who went out?" I stammered, for I was unaccountably confused. "He told me you were engaged; why did he not say it was Mr. Hawtry? He pretended it was somebody on business." But here I stopped, for Aunt Agatha was making a funny face, as though she were trying to keep grave, and Mr. Hawtry had become very red all at once, and turned to the window.

"Why should I not have business with your friend Mr. Hawtry, Merle?" Why did she call him my friend, I wonder? Had she forgotten my position and his? Aunt Agatha was never awkward; she had more *savoir faire* than most people. If it were not incredible, I could almost have believed she was nervous too.

"Oh, I don't know," I returned, rather lamely; "you and Mr. Hawtry are strangers." But at this he came forward again.

"This is my first introduction to Mrs. Keith, certainly," he said, quickly; "but I can not allow we are strangers, Miss Fenton. You have already made me so well acquainted with your aunt that I ventured to do myself the pleasure of calling upon her. I consider we know each other quite well now."

I thought Aunt Agatha looked pleased at that. She had a pretty color this afternoon, as though she were excited, and yet I have heard Uncle Keith say that if the queen were to call on his wife she would not be discomposed; but there were several little signs that told me she was not quite at her ease.

"I must see about tea," she said, getting up a little abruptly. "I dare say you can amuse Mr. Hawtry for a few minutes, Merle. He can tell you all about Mrs. Rossiter."

"Oh, yes," I returned, carelessly, "I shall be so glad to hear all the Netherton news. Have you been to

Wheeler's Farm lately, Mr. Hawtry, and seen Molly? And how is Luke Armstrong getting on? And is the cottage pretty?"

"Am I to answer all these questions?" he pleaded. "And which am I to take first? By the bye, your friend Mrs. Rossiter has sent you a message. I did not know I should see you to-day, or I would have brought it with me. It is a floral message, Miss Fenton, and tells its own story."

CHAPTER XXIV.

"REAPING THE HARVEST."

I WISHED Mr. Harvey would sit down and talk to me in his usual friendly fashion; but he kept fidgeting about the room, taking up books and laying them down all the time that I was plying him with questions about Marshlands, and Gay, and Mr. Rossiter.

After the first moment of blank astonishment I was really very pleased to see him. I could hardly now believe it was Mr. Hawtry who was moving so restlessly from the table to the window. He looked browner than ever, and very strong and well, and I nearly forgot to ask after his broken leg.

"Oh, it is all right now," he answered, absently. He was certainly very absent, very unlike himself. I think I talked all the faster, because in my heart I felt nervous too.

"You are coming down to Marshlands next week, I hear," he said at last, stopping straight before me.

"Yes, we are all coming," I answered, joyously; "Mrs. Morton and the new baby, and Mrs. Morris."

"Who in the world is Mrs. Morris?" he asked, rather impatiently. It was a droll sort of impatience, but I thought he looked anxious.

"Mrs. Morris is baby's nurse at present. She is going

to stay until September; and then I shall take her place, and baby will be in my charge."

"Oh, that is nonsense!" he said, quite gruffly; "I can not allow that for a moment, Miss Fenton." And then, as I looked astonished at this, he said, in an odd sort of choked voice, "I think I need you more than Mrs. Morton does, Merle."

Are we capable of any feeling at all when we arrive at the crisis of our life, when some shock comes to us, upheaving our former world, and overwhelming us with sudden chaos? The numb intensity that seizes upon us seems to deaden all sensation.

My first conscious thought was that I had known all the time what this meant, that it did not surprise me in the least; but this was an entire falsity on my part, arising from complete incredulity. Never had I imagined in my wildest dreams that life held such a gift for me; but I was too much stunned to accept it unconditionally.

I put aside Mr. Hawtry's earnest solicitations that I should try to care for him sufficiently to be his wife, and wasted much precious time in pointing out to him my apparent unfitness for such a position. I remember I sat there with cold hands and burning face, arguing against myself and lamenting my deficiencies, till I broke down at last, and could not find voice to tell him more.

He heard me with a sort of tender impatience visible in his manner, but he did not interrupt me as long as my voice and courage lasted. When my shamefaced remarks were ended, he said, very gently:

"What nonsense you have been talking! I should hardly have believed that such a sensible girl could say such things. Do you want a list of my deficiencies and shortcomings also? Shall we make out a tabular demonstration of each other's defects? No, Merle, this is not the question between us. I respect and honor you more than I can tell you, and nothing you have said can influence me

in the least. What I want to know now is, can you care for me sufficiently to be willing to marry me?"

After that there was only one answer possible. I did care for Mr. Hawtry, and I told him so.

His gratitude seemed overwhelming. But I am afraid I was rather stupid and irresponsive. My sudden happiness dazzled and bewildered me; but I think he understood how I felt. He told me he had cared for me almost the first time he spoke to me, and his interest had been excited by my choice of work; that I had seemed to him more real and earnest and self-denying than other girls, but he had respected me too much to intrude himself too suddenly on my life. He had let me go reluctantly, hoping to see me soon again, but his cousin's illness and his own accident had kept us long apart.

"I had plenty of leisure time for thinking of you, Merle," he said, smiling, "when I was lying up with my broken leg. Edgar did his best for me, but with all his good nursing, poor fellow, I thought a woman's hand would have been softer about me. Do you remember my telling you, dear, that I wished Agnes could have known you? I meant to try and win you for my wife then."

I seemed to grow calmer and quieter while he talked to me in this way. He was so very gentle that I soon grew less shy with him; but still it seemed to me wonderful, almost a miracle, that any one so good and kind should care for me.

We had forgotten Aunt Agatha until Mr. Hawtry—but he told me that I should have to call him Roger—spoke of her. It seems he was telling her all about his hopes when I rang at the bell. He was embarrassed himself at the sight of me.

"Your aunt and I agreed upon one point," he said, rather mischievously, for I had asked him not to praise me so; but he was not able to finish his speech, for Aunt Agatha herself interrupted us.

Mr. Hawtry met her at the door and said something to her in a low voice. I saw her dear face light up and the tears come into her eyes, and then she held out her arms to me.

"Is it really so, Merle, dear child? I wish you every happiness. I know your friend very little, it is true; but all the same I feel sure we may trust you to him." And then she and Mr. Hawtry shook hands; and I liked the way they looked at each other.

Uncle Keith was fidgeting for his tea, and no wonder, for it was nearly an hour after the usual time. Kind, thoughtful Aunt Agatha! He was walking up and down the room looking at his watch, but he thumped it in his pocket when he entered, and said "Hir-rumph!" and if ever a man looked pleased when Aunt Agatha put her hands on his shoulders and whispered in his ear, Uncle Keith did at that moment.

He wished us joy very nicely, though he cleared his throat a great deal over it, as though he were rather embarrassed, but his eyes twinkled every time he looked at us, and I knew by the way he talked to Mr. Hawtry that he liked him; indeed, they got on very well together.

When tea was over, we all sat at the open bay-window in the drawing-room, talking very happily. Aunt Agatha and I sat hand in hand on the couch, but Mr. Hawtry was very near us.

It was twilight presently, and there was only a glimmer of light in the road outside. The moon had not yet risen, but there was a star or two in the dark-blue sky. The room was sweet with scented geranium and roses; a moth flew in at the open window and brushed against us. Some children were singing in the distance. How still and peaceful it was! Aunt Agatha and I grew silent presently while the others talked. It was nice to listen to them; their voices seemed to blend with a dream—a happy dream that was to go on and on. Was it only the even-

ing of the day when Hannah had talked to me about the brindled cow? I had crossed the bridge so carelessly that afternoon in the sunshine, never dreaming that it would lead me to a new life.

The moon had risen when we crossed it an hour later; the whole world seemed bathed in its pure white radiance. Everything was transfigured, even the silent cranes and pulleys and blocks of stone were touched with radiance or emitted strange shadows. The gray towers of All Saints stood out clearly against the blue sky. Ripples of iridescent light played on the river—silvery gleams of brightness with a margin of blue-blackness. I remembered that we talked little, but that our silence held a world of meaning in it. When Mr. Hawtry spoke, it was of his mother and Agnes. He had dearly loved them, and his was a faithful nature; it did not bury its dead out of sight and cease to lament them. There were household niches left vacant, where the tenderest memories were enshrined.

It promised well for my future that this was the case. The loving son and brother would surely be a faithful husband. I know that I listened to him with a full heart, that all sorts of tender vows and silent prayers and inaudible thanksgivings seemed to frame themselves. As I walked beside him I thought of Gay's artless speech, "Do we any of us deserve our happiness?" Oh, no; she was right; it is a free gift received from the All-Father.

Mr. Hawtry bade me good-bye at the door, but our parting was not for long. I knew I should see him in the morning.

Hannah seemed a little startled when she saw me. "How late you are, Miss Fenton! I was just wondering what had become of you;" and then her eyes opened rather widely. "Has anything happened, for you look different somehow?"

I had not meant to tell any one that night; but Hannah was trustworthy and faithful, and I was very fond of her.

"Nothing has happened," I returned, with assumed carelessness, "except that Mr. Hawtry was at Aunt Agatha's."

"Mr. Hawtry, miss!" with a shrill crescendo of astonishment.

"Yes; I was very much surprised to see him, as you may imagine; and Hannah, I expect I shall surprise you too, because I am going to marry Mr. Hawtry."

I shall never forget the girl's look; her rosy face turned quite pale; her eyes were distended with wonder.

"You are going to marry Squire Hawtry, Miss Fenton!" And then in her excitement she kissed me heartily, and a moment afterward begged my pardon for taking such a liberty. "You must forgive me, miss, for I was almost beside myself with the news."

"No sense, Hannah, I have nothing to forgive," I returned, blushingly.

"Oh, but you will be Madame Hawtry some day," replied Hannah, humbly, "and Luke's only a farm servant, and Lyddy also. I must not forget the difference between us. I wish you joy, Miss Fenton, indeed I do. Squire Hawtry is the finest gentleman I know, and Molly says the same. She will be proud and glad when she hears the news that you are coming to the Red Farm."

Hannah's words almost took my breath away. I was glad when she bade me good-night and left me alone with the sleeping children.

I crept softly to the window, and sat for some time looking over the moonlit gardens. I felt, with a sudden thrill at the remembrance of Hannah's words, that I had not realized it yet. I had only thought of Mr. Hawtry—of his wonderful goodness and kindness. It had not entered my mind that I should spend my life at the Red Farm.

It seemed almost too good to be true. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine it all. Should I ever spend long happy days in that drawing-room, looking out on the bowling-green? Should I sit in the porch and see the privet

hedge and the walnut-tree with the circular seat, and smell the jasmine and clematis?

Squire Hawtry's wife at the Red Farm! No, I could not believe it yet. I remembered how I had sat in the old nursery at Marshlands, dreaming of all sorts of things in the moonlight, until I had fallen asleep. Such a thought as this had never occurred to me. I had imagined myself an old woman, sitting by a solitary fireside; but there had been no Squire Hawtry riding up on brown Peter then.

It was long before I could sleep that night. Many a girl in my position has felt as I did, loath to close my eyes on that happy day. One sleeps heavily for sorrow, as the disciples did in the moonlit garden; but joy seems only to keep our young hearts restless. I wondered the next morning when I should be summoned down-stairs. I knew Mr. Hawtry would come early and bring Gay's flowers with him, but he would not ask for me at once.

Presently a message came up to the nursery that Hannah was to take the children into the public garden. I knew what this meant: Mr. Hawtry had told my mistress. I dressed the children as quickly as possible, thinking that I should be sent for every minute; but it was some time before I heard anything; then my mistress came up to me herself, with Gay's basket of flowers in her hand. I saw she was much moved. Her lovely eyes were full of tears as she came up to me.

"Roger has told me, Merle. Perhaps I ought not to have been so surprised. It is not strange, after all, that he should love you; he must have seen for himself how brave and good you were. I like him all the better for loving you." And then she kissed me.

She said a great deal more to me, holding my hand. She was so glad for my sake, so sorry for her own, for she would miss me so out of her daily life; but she would not speak of that.

"Roger is waiting for you in the little drawing-room,"

she said, at last. "I ought not to detain you any longer. To-morrow we will have a long talk. But he wishes to see Alick first. Do not keep him waiting any longer, Merle."

I went down at once, for I knew he could not wait long, as he had other business. It was strange, and yet familiar, to see him again; but he soon thawed my shyness, and we had a nice long talk. He was going to dine there that night, but he said he should not see me. The next day he meant to take me down to Putney, to spend his last evening with me, as he must return to Netherton the next morning.

"Never mind, I shall see you very often there," I replied, cheerfully; for I quite understood the difficulty of seeing each other under my mistress's roof.

"Indeed I hope so," he returned, with rather a strange smile, "if the Red Farm is to be your home."

But, of course, I was speaking of our visit to Marshlands, but he seemed as if he would not understand; he only assured me very seriously that he would see me as often as possible. His manner troubled me a little, until he begged me not to disturb myself about any future arrangements, as he and Mrs. Morton were considering what to do for the best, and I was only to think of him.

It certainly was rather strange sitting in the nursery that evening, and knowing that Mr. Hawtry was downstairs; but I felt instinctively it would be quite as hard for him as for me, so I comforted myself with the prospert of the next day. My mistress came up presently with some beautiful flowers in her hand.

"Roger has sent you these, Merle, to wish you goodnight. He was obliged to go early; but I have a message to give you as well. He hopes that you will be kind enough to listen to me very patiently, and that you will accede to our wishes."

I felt this was a little solemn, and my face certainly fell when my mistress said, very gently, that, under existing

circumstances, her husband and she herself thought that it would be far better for me not to go to Marshlands next week.

"It is very hard to part with you so soon, Merle," she said, kindly; "but for Roger's sake we think it better to leave you behind. You see, your position in our household makes things rather difficult. It is quite true, as Alick says, that in marrying you he is marrying a gentlewoman; but the Netherton and Orton folk are sad gossips, and altogether things would be somewhat uncomfortable for you both."

"I do not wish to put Mr. Hawtry in an uncomfortable position," I said, with a touch of my old pride; but she shook her head at me, still smiling.

"You need not be afraid of what Roger says; he simply glories in your work. He is quite willing to publish the whole thing to the Netherton world at once. He told me quite seriously just now that there was not a lady in the place to compare with you He honors you as only a true man can honor a woman."

The tears came into my eyes. Yes, I knew this. I answered humbly that I did not mean to be proud; I would do as he and my mistress wished.

"Then, if you are so generous, Merle," she said, quietly, "you will not come to Marshlands just now, to involve Roger in all sorts of perplexing difficulties; or, at least, if you come it must be as my guest, and not as my nurse."

"Oh, no," I returned, shrinking back; "I was not prepared for this."

"Then, my dear Merle, will you act as a sensible woman? Stay with Mrs. Keith during our absence, and quietly prepare for your wedding. Roger thinks in October both you and he might be ready."

The idea startled me. What would Aunt Agatha say? But I very soon found Aunt Agatha was quite of my mistress's opinion, and was almost as eager as Mrs. Mor-

ton to smooth things as much as possible for Mr. Hawtry. After the first shock of my surprise, I came gradually to the same conviction. Mr. Hawtry said very little to me on the subject; on the contrary, he laughed to scorn the idea that my service was derogatory to him.

"I loved you first because you were so brave and unconventional—because you were unlike any other girl. Why should you say such things to me, Merle?"

And after that I ceased to say them; but how I honored him for that manly expression of opinion! But his very generosity made demands on me. I knew his home was solitary, and that he needed my companionship. He was too unselfish to press his wishes on me, but he evidently saw no reasons for delay.

I yielded with a good grace at last, when I found even Aunt Agatha was against me; but neither she nor Mr. Hawtry knew what it cost me to part so soon with my mistress and the children. It almost broke my heart to see them go without me.

Mrs. Morris had promised to remain until Christmas; but Hannah would be married before then, and I wondered sadly, as I drove with my luggage to the cottage, who would replace me at Prince's Gate.

"In the morning sow thy seed, and in the evening withhold not thy hand." How those words came to me a month later, when one of my old school-fellows, Helen Transome, wrote to me and begged me to use my influence with my mistress and procure the situation for her!

I knew her sad circumstances would appeal to my mistress's feeling heart. Poor Helen! hers had been a trying life. Her family had suffered great reverses; from wealth they had been reduced almost to indigence. Her father had died, worn out with the bitter struggle, and her lover had given her up for a richer bride.

Helen had borne her troubles with a patience that bordered on heroism; but it had broken the springs of youth

She looked far older than her years warranted, and much of her beauty had faded; but she was fair and gentle-looking, with soft manners, that seemed to win my mistress. Her love of children was evident; she had a quiet influence with them that made itself felt.

"Miss Transome will never take your place, Merle," my mistress said to me, a few weeks after Helen had taken up my work; "but she is very nice and kind to the children, and Mrs. Morris says I shall be able to trust baby to her. I do believe the poor thing looks a little happier already. I went in just now, and heard her laughing at something Joyce said. She has such a silvery, pretty laugh."

I knew that my mistress would soon take poor Helen into her heart, and I was glad to think she had found such a kind refuge. We did not speak much of Helen then; I was paying my good-bye visit to Prince's Gate, for two days later I was to be married.

They had loaded me with beautiful gifts suitable to my new position; but I was not thinking of them or of my mistress's last loving speech as I walked across the bridge. It was October again, and the red and yellow leaves were floating on the water; the mellow air and sunshine spoke of harvests garnered in while the earth rested after her labors.

My harvest had come already, and yet the laborer had worked but a short time in the vineyard, while others would toil until evening. I had done so little and reaped so much. Through the slanting sunbeams I looked to the distant home where Roger was waiting for me, in that home where, God willing, we should work together, not leading idle lives, but sharing with others a little of our happiness, and where, out of our full hearts, we should surely give "praise continually;" and as these thoughts came to me, I seemed to hear Roger's deep voice echoing "Amen."

THE END.

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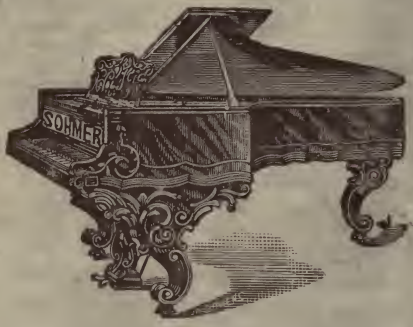

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